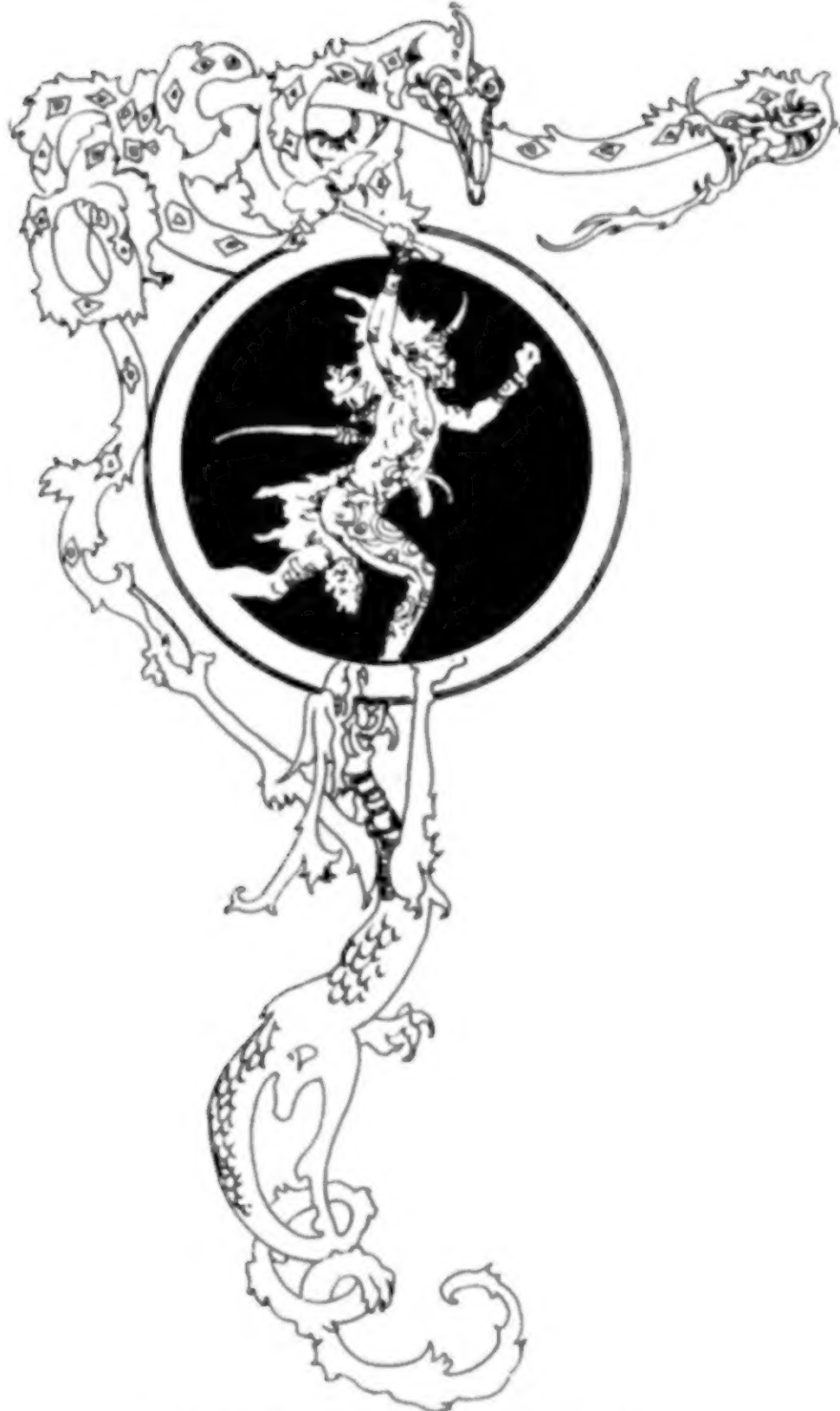


CONAN

THE TREASURE OF TRANICOS





7. Men of the Woods

Chronological order of the CONAN series:

CONAN
CONAN OF CIMMERIA
CONAN THE FREEBOOTER
CONAN THE WANDERER
CONAN THE ADVENTURER
CONAN THE BUCCANEER
CONAN THE WARRIOR
CONAN THE USURPER
CONAN THE CONQUEROR
CONAN THE AVENGER
CONAN OF AQUILONIA
CONAN OF THE ISLES

Illustrated CONAN novels:

CONAN AND THE SORCERER
CONAN: THE FLAME KNIFE
CONAN THE MERCENARY
THE TREASURE OF TRANICOS

Other CONAN novels:

THE BLADE OF CONAN
THE SPELL OF CONAN

THE TREASURE OF TRANICOS

by Robert E. Howard

as revised and edited by L. Sprague de
Camp

Revised by L. Sprague de Camp

Illustrated by Maroto



ACE FANTASY BOOKS
NEW YORK

The Treasure of Tranicos was originally published, as revised by L. Sprague de Camp, under the title *The Black Stranger*, in *Fantasy Magazine* for March 1953, copyright © 1953 by Future Publications, Inc. It was reprinted under its present title in *King Conan*, by Robert E. Howard, N.Y.: Gnome Press, Inc., 1953, and also in *Conan the Usurper*, copyright © 1967 by L. Sprague de Camp.

The Trail of Tranicos by L. Sprague de Camp was originally published in *Amra*, copyright © 1967 by L. Sprague de Camp. *Skald in the Post Oaks* by L. Sprague de Camp was originally published in *Fantastic Stories*, copyright © 1971 by Ultimate Publishing Co., Inc.

THE TREASURE OF TRANICOS

An Ace Fantasy Book / published by arrangement with Conan Properties, Inc.

PRINTING HISTORY

First Ace printing / July 1980

Fourth printing / July 1985

All rights reserved.

Copyright © 1980 by Conan Properties, Inc.

Illustrations copyright © 1980 by Esteban Maroto

Cover art by Sanjulian

This book may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by mimeograph or any other means, without permission.

For information address: The Berkley Publishing Group,
200 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016.

ISBN: 0-441-82246-0

Ace Fantasy Books are published by The Berkley Publishing Group, 200 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



Contents

Introduction by L. Sprague de Camp

1. The Painted Men

2. Men from the Sea

3. The Dark Stranger

4. A Black Drum Droning

5. A Man from the Wilderness

6. The Plunder of the Dead

7. Men of the Woods

8. Swords of Aquilonia

The Trail of Tranicos by L. Sprague de Camp

Skald in the Post Oaks by L. Sprague de Camp



Introduction

by L. Sprague de Camp

The Conan saga runs as follows: Conan, the son of a Cimmerian blacksmith, was born on a battlefield in that hilly, cloudy land. As a youth he took part in the sack of the Aquilonian frontier post of Venarium. Subsequently, joining in a raid with a band of AEsir into Hyperborea, he was captured by the Hyperboreans. Escaping from the Hyperborean slave pen, he wandered south into Zamora and adjacent counties, making a precarious living as a thief. Green to civilization and quite lawless by nature, he made up for his lack of

subtlety and sophistication by natural shrewdness and the herculean physique he had inherited from his father.

Eventually, he enlisted as a mercenary in the army of King Yildiz of Turan. He traveled widely through the Hyrkanian lands and acquired a knowledge of archery and horsemanship. Later he served as a *condottiere* in the Hyborian lands, led a piratical band of black corsairs on the coast of Kush, and served as a mercenary in Shem and the adjacent counties. He returned to outlawry among the *kozaki* of the eastern steppes and the pirates of the Sea of Vilayet. After mercenary service for the kingdom of Khauran, he spent two years as a chief of the Zuagirs, the nomadic eastern Shemites. Then followed wild adventures in the eastern lands of Iranistan and Vendhya, in the course of which Conan confronted the Black Seers of Yimsha in the Himelian Mountains.

Returning to the west, Conan again became a freebooter with the Barachan pirates and the Zingaran buccaneers. Then he served again as a mercenary in Stygia and among the black kingdoms. He wandered north to Aquilonia and — now about forty years old — became a scout on the Pictish frontier. When the Picts, with the help of the wizard Zogar Sag, attacked the Aquilonian settlements, Conan tried but failed to save Fort Tuscelan from destruction, but he did save the lives of a number of settlers between the Thunder and Black rivers. At this point, the present book begins. . . .

Conan rises rapidly in the Aquilonian service. Becoming a general, he defeats the Picts in a great battle at Velitrium and breaks the back of their confederacy. Then he is called back to the capital, Tarantia, for a triumph. But, having aroused the suspicion and jealousy of the depraved and foolish King Numedides, he is plied with drugged wine and chained in the Iron Tower under sentence of death. The barbarian, however, has friends as well as enemies in Aquilonia, and soon he is spirited out of his prison and turned loose with a horse and a sword. Riding back to the frontier, he finds his Bossonian troops scattered and a price on his head. Swimming Thunder River, he strikes out across the dank forests of Pictland toward the distant sea.





One moment the glade lay empty; the next, a man stood poised warily at the edge of the bushes. There had been no sound to warn the gray squirrels of his coming; but the gay-hued birds that flitted about in the sunshine of the open space took fright at his sudden appearance and rose in a clamoring cloud. The man scowled and glanced quickly back the way he had come, as if fearing that their flight had betrayed his position to someone unseen. Then he stalked across the glade, placing his feet with care.

For all his massive, muscular build, the man moved with the supple certitude of a leopard. He was naked except for a rag twisted about his loins, and his limbs were crisscrossed with scratches from briars and caked with dried mud. A brown-crust bandage was

knotted about his thickly-muscled left arm. Under his matted, black mane, his face was drawn and gaunt, and his eyes burned like those of a wounded wolf. He limped slightly as he followed the faint path that led across the open space.

Halfway across the glade, he stopped short and whirled catlike, facing back the way he had come, as a long-drawn call quavered out across the forest. To another man it would have seemed merely the howl of a wolf. But this man knew it was no wolf. A Cimmerian, he understood the voices of the wilderness as a city-bred man recognizes the voices of his friends.

Rage burned redly in his bloodshot eyes as he turned once more and hurried along the path. This path, as it left the glade, ran along the edge of a dense thicket that rose in a solid clump of greenery among the trees and bushes. A massive log, deeply embedded in the grassy earth, paralleled the fringe of the thicket, laying between it and the path. When the Cimmerian saw this log, he halted and looked back across the glade. To the average eye there were no signs to show that he had passed; but the evidence was visible to his wilderness-sharpened eyes and therefore to the equally keen eyes of those who pursued him. He snarled silently, like a hunted beast ready to turn at bay.

He walked with deliberate carelessness down the trail, here and there crushing a grass-blade beneath his foot. Then, when he had reached the further end of the great log, he sprang upon it, turned, and ran lightly back along it. As the bark had long been worn away by the elements, he left no sign to show the keenest eyes that he had doubled on his trail. When he reached the densest part of the thicket, he faded into it like a shadow, with hardly the quiver of a leaf to mark his passing.

The minutes dragged. The gray squirrels chattered again — then flattened their bodies against the branches and were suddenly mute. Again the glade was invaded. As silently as the first man had appeared, three other men materialized out of the eastern edge of the clearing: dark-skinned men of short stature, with thickly-muscled chests and arms. They wore beaded buckskin loincloths, and an

eagle's feather was thrust into each black topknot. Their bodies were painted in intricate designs, and they were heavily armed with crude weapons of hammered copper.



They had scanned the glade carefully before showing themselves in the open, for they moved out of the bushes with hesitation, in close single file, treading as softly as leopards and bending down to

stare at the path. They were following the trail of the Cimmerian — no easy task even for these human bloodhounds. They moved slowly across the glade; then one of them stiffened, grunted, and pointed with his broad-bladed stabbing-spear at a crushed grass-blade where the path entered the forest again. All halted instantly, their beady black eyes questing the forest walls. But their quarry was well hidden. Seeing nothing to awaken suspicion, they presently moved on, more rapidly now. They followed the faint marks that implied their prey was growing careless through weakness or desperation.

They had just passed the spot where the thicket crowded closest to the ancient trail, when the Cimmerian bounded into the path behind them, gripping the weapons he had drawn from his loincloth: a long copper-bladed knife in his left hand and a hatchet of the same material in his right. The attack was so quick and unexpected that the last Pict had no chance to save himself as the Cimmerian plunged his knife between the man's shoulders. The blade was in the Pict's heart before he knew he was in peril.



The other two whirled with the steel-trap quickness of savages; but, even as the Cimmerian wrenched the knife out of his first

victim's back, he struck a tremendous blow with the war-ax in his right hand. The second Pict was in the act of turning as the ax fell, splitting his skull to the teeth.

The remaining Pict, a chief by the scarlet tip of his eagle feather, came savagely in to the attack. He was stabbing at the Cimmerian's breast even as the killer wrenched his ax from the dead man's head. The Cimmerian had the advantage of a greater intelligence, and a weapon in each hand. The hatchet, checked in its downward sweep, struck the spear aside, and the knife in the Cimmerian's left hand ripped upward into the painted belly.

An awful howl burst from the Pict's lips as he crumpled, disemboweled. The cry of baffled, bestial fury was answered by a wild chorus of yells from some distance east of the glade. The Cimmerian started convulsively and wheeled, crouching like a wild thing at bay, lips asnarl and shaking the sweat from his face. Blood trickled down his forearm from under the bandage.

With a gasping, incoherent imprecation, he turned and fled westward. He did not pick his way now but ran with all the speed of his long legs, calling on the deep and all but inexhaustible reservoirs of endurance that are Nature's compensation for a barbaric existence. Behind him for a space the woods were silent. Then a demoniac howling burst out, and he knew his pursuers had found the bodies of his victims. He had no breath for cursing the drops of blood that kept falling to the ground from his freshly-opened wound, leaving a trail a child could follow. He had thought that perhaps these three Picts were all that still pursued him of the war-party that had followed him for over a hundred miles. But he might have known that these human wolves would never quit a blood trail.

The woods were silent again; that meant they were racing after him, marking his path by the betraying blood-drops he could not check. A wind out of the west, laden with a salty dampness that he recognized, blew against his face. Dully, he was amazed. If he was that close to the sea, the chase must have been even longer than he had realized.

But now it was nearly over, even his wolfish vitality was ebbing under the terrible strain. He gasped for breath, and there was a sharp pain in his side. His legs trembled with weariness, and the lame one ached like the cut of a knife in the tendons every time he set the foot to earth. He had followed the instincts of the wilderness that had bred him, straining every nerve and sinew, exhausting every subtlety and artifice to survive. Now, in his extremity, he was obeying another instinct — to find a place to turn at bay and sell his life at a bloody price.

He did not leave the trail for the tangled depths on either hand. It was futile, he knew, to hope to evade his pursuers now. He ran on down the trail while the blood pounded louder and louder in his ears and each breath he drew was a racking, dry-lipped gulp. Behind him a mad baying broke out, token that they were close on his heels and expected swiftly to overhaul their prey. Now they would come as fleet as starving wolves, howling at every leap.

Abruptly he burst from the denseness of the trees and saw, ahead of him, the face of a cliff that rose almost straight from the ground without any intermediate slope. Glances to right and left showed that he faced a solitary dome or crag of rock that rose like a tower from the depths of the forest. As a boy, the Cimmerian had scaled the steep hills of his native land; but, while he might have attempted the near side of this crag had he been in prime condition, he knew that he would have little chance with it in his present wounded and weakened state. By the time he had struggled up twenty or thirty feet, the Picts would burst from the woods and fill him with arrows.

Perhaps, however, the crag's other faces would prove less inhospitable. The trail curved around the crag to the right. Following it, he found that at the west side of the crag it wound up rocky ledges between jagged boulders to a broad ledge near the summit.

That ledge would be as good a place to die as any. As the world swam before him in a dizzy red mist, he limped up the trail, going on hands and knees in the steeper places, holding his knife between his teeth.

He had not yet reached the jutting ledge when some forty painted savages raced around from the far side of the crag, howling like wolves. At the sight of their prey, their screams rose to a devilish crescendo, and they ran to the foot of the crag, loosing arrows as they came. The shafts showered about the man who climbed doggedly upward, and one stuck in the calf of his leg. Without pausing in his climb, he tore it out and threw it aside, heedless of the less accurate missiles that cracked against the rocks about him. Grimly he hauled himself over the rim of the ledge and turned about, drawing his hatchet and shifting his knife to his hand. He lay glaring down at his pursuers over the rim, only his shock of hair and blazing eyes visible. His chest heaved as he drank in the air in great, shuddering gasps, and he clenched his teeth against a tendency toward nausea.

Only a few more arrows whistled up at him; the horde knew its prey was cornered. The warriors came on howling, war-axes in hand and leaping agilely over the rocks at the foot of the hill. The first to reach the steep part of the crag was a brawny brave, whose eagle feather was stained scarlet as a token of chieftainship. He halted briefly, one foot on the sloping trail, arrow notched and drawn halfway back, head thrown back and lips parted for an exultant yell. But the shaft was never loosed. He froze into motionlessness as the blood lust in his black eyes gave way to a look of startled recognition. With a whoop he gave back, throwing his arms wide to check the rush of his howling braves. Although the man on the ledge above them understood the Pictish tongue, he was too far away to catch the significance of the staccato phrases snapped at the warriors by the crimson-feathered chief.

They all ceased their yelping and stood mutely staring up — not, it seemed to the man on the ledge, at him, but at the hill itself. Then, without further hesitation, they unstrung their bows and thrust them into buckskin cases at their girdles, turned their backs, and trotted back along the trail by which they had come, to disappear around the curve of the cliff without a backward look.

The Cimmerian glared in amazement. He knew the Pictish nature too well not to recognize the finality expressed in this departure. He knew they would not come back; they were heading for their villages, a hundred miles to the east.

But he could not understand it. What was there about his refuge that would cause a Pictish war-party to abandon a chase it had followed so long with all the passion of hungry wolves? He knew there were sacred places, spots set aside as sanctuaries by the various clans, and that a fugitive, taking refuge in one of these sanctuaries, was safe from the clan that raised it. But the different tribes seldom respected the sanctuaries of other tribes, and the men who pursued him certainly had no sacred spots of their own in this region. They were men of the Eagle, whose villages lay far to the east, adjoining the country of the Wolf Picts.

It was the Wolves who had captured the Cimmerian when he had plunged into the wilderness in his flight from Aquilonia, and it was they who had given him to the Eagles in return for a captured Wolf chief. The Eagle men had a red score against the giant Cimmerian, and now it was redder still, for his escape had cost the life of a noted war chief. That was why they had followed him so relentlessly, over broad rivers and rugged hills and through long leagues of gloomy forest, the hunting grounds of hostile tribes. And now the survivors of that long chase had turned back when their enemy was run to earth and trapped. He shook his head, unable to understand it.

He rose gingerly, dizzy from the long grind and scarcely able to realize that it was over. His limbs were stiff; his wounds ached. He spat dryly and cursed, rubbing his burning, bloodshot eyes with the back of his thick wrist. He blinked and took stock of his surroundings. Below him the green wilderness billowed away and away in a solid mass, and above its western rim rose a steel-blue haze that, he knew, hung over the ocean. The wind stirred his black mane, and the salt tang of the atmosphere revived him. He expanded his enormous chest and drank it in.

Then he turned stiffly and painfully about, growling at the twinge in his bleeding calf, and investigated the ledge on which he stood. Behind it rose a sheer, rocky cliff to the crest of the crag, some thirty feet above him. A narrow, ladderlike stair of handholds had been niched into the rock, and a few feet from the foot of this ascent a cleft, wide and tall enough for a man to enter, opened in the wall.

He limped to the cleft, peered in, and grunted. The sun, hanging high above the western forest, threw a shaft of light down the cleft, revealing a tunnel-like cavern beyond with an arch at its end. In that arch, illuminated by the beam, was set a heavy, iron-bound, oaken door!



This was amazing. This country was a howling wilderness. The Cimmerian knew that for a thousand miles, this western coast ran bare and uninhabited except by the villages of the ferocious sea-land tribes, who were even less civilized than their forest-dwelling brothers.

The nearest outposts of civilization were the frontier settlements along Thunder River, hundreds of miles to the east. The Cimmerian knew that he was the only white man ever to cross the wilderness

that lay between the river and the coast. Yet that door was no work of Picts.

Being unexplainable, it was an object of suspicion, and suspiciously he approached it, ax and knife ready. Then, as his bloodshot eyes became more accustomed to the soft gloom that lurked on either side of the narrow shaft of sunlight, he noticed something else. The tunnel widened out before it came to the door, and along the walls were ranged massive, iron-bound chests. A blaze of comprehension came into his eyes. He bent over one, but the lid resisted his efforts. He lifted his hatchet to shatter the ancient lock; then changed his mind and limped toward the arched door. Now his bearing was more confident, and his weapons hung at his sides. He pushed against the ornately-carven door, and it swung inward without resistance.

Then, with a lightninglike abruptness, his manner changed again. He recoiled with a startled curse, knife and hatchet flashing as they leaped to positions of defense. An instant he poised there, like a statue of fierce menace, craning his massive neck to glare through the door.

He was looking into a cave, darker than the tunnel, but meagerly illuminated by the dim glow that came from the great jewel that stood on the tiny ivory pedestal in the center of the great ebony table, about which sat those silent shapes whose appearance had so startled the Cimmerian.



These did not move, nor did they turn their heads toward him; but the bluish mist that overhung the chamber seemed to move like a living thing.

"Well," he said harshly, "are you all drunk?"

There was no reply. He was not a man easily abashed, yet now he felt disconcerted.

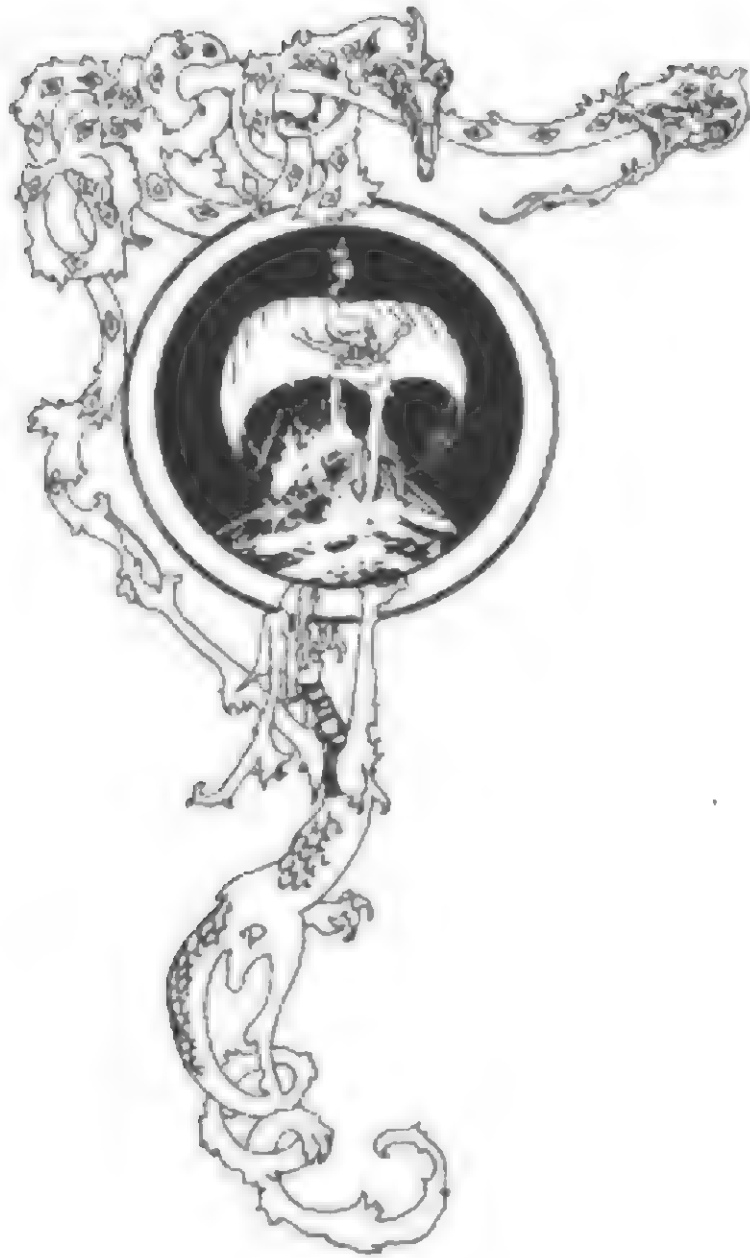
"You might offer me a glass of that wine your're swigging," he growled, his natural belligerence aroused by the awkwardness of the situation. "By Crom, you show damned poor courtesy to a man who's been one of your own brotherhood. Are you going to —"

His voice trailed off into silence, and in silence he stood and stared a while at those bizarre figures sitting so silently about the great ebony table.

"They're not drunk," he muttered presently. "They're not even drinking. What devil's game is this?"

He stepped across the threshold. Instantly the movement of the blue mist quickened. The stuff flowed together and solidified, and the Cimmerian found himself fighting for his life against huge black hands that darted for his throat.





2. Men from the Sea



Belesa idly stirred a sea shell with a daintily slipped toe, mentally comparing its delicate pink edges to the first pink haze of dawn that rose over the misty beaches. Dawn was now past, but the early sun had not yet dispelled the light, pearly clouds that drifted over the waters to westward.

She lifted her splendidly-shaped head and stared out over a scene alien and repellent to her, yet drearily familiar in every detail. From her small feet, the tawny sands ran to meet the softly-lapping waves, which stretched westward to be lost in the blue haze of the horizon. She was standing on the southern curve of a wide bay; south of her the land sloped up to the low ridge that formed one horn on that bay. From that ridge, she knew, one could look southward across the bare waters into infinities of distance as absolute as the view to the westward and to the northward.

Glancing listlessly landward, she absently scanned the fortress, which had been her home for the past year and a half. Against a vague, pearl-and-cerulean morning sky floated the golden and scarlet flag of her house. But the red falcon on its golden field awakened no enthusiasm in her youthful bosom, although it had flown over many a bloody field in the far south.

She made out the figures of men toiling in the gardens and fields that huddled near the fort, seeming to shrink from the gloomy rampart of the forest that fringed the open belt to the east, stretching north and south as far as she could see. She feared that forest, and that fear was shared by everyone in that tiny settlement. Nor was it an idle fear. Death lurked in those whispering depths — death swift and terrible, death slow and hideous — hidden, painted, tireless, unrelenting.

She sighed and moved toward the water's edge, with no set purpose in mind. The dragging days were all of one color, and the world of cities and courts and gaiety seemed thousands of miles and ages of time away. Again she sought in vain for the reason that had caused a count of Zingara to flee with his retainers to this wild coast, hundreds of miles from the land that bore him, exchanging the castle of his ancestors for a hut of logs.

Belesa's eyes softened at the light patter of small bare feet across the sands. A young girl came running over the low, sandy ridge, naked and dripping, with her flaxen hair plastered wetly to her small head. Her wistful eyes were wide with excitement.

"Lady Belesa!" she cried, rendering the Zingaran words with a soft, Ophirean accent. "Oh, Lady Belesa!"

Breathless from her scamper, the child stammered and gestured with her hands. Belesa smiled and put an arm about her, not minding that her silken dress came in contact with the damp, warm body. In her lonely, isolated life, Belesa had bestowed the tenderness of a naturally affectionate nature on the pitiful waif she had taken away from a brutal master on that long voyage up from the southern coasts.



"What are you trying to tell me, Tina? Get your breath, child."

"A ship!" cried the girl, pointing southward. "I was swimming in a pool that the tide left in the sand, on the other side of the ridge, and I saw it! A ship sailing up out of the south!"

She tugged timidly at Belesa's hand, her slender body aquiver. And Belesa felt her own heart beat faster at the mere thought of an unknown visitor. They had seen no sail since coming to that barren shore.

Tina flitted ahead of her over the yellow sands, skirting the little pools that the outgoing tide had left in shallow depressions. They mounted the low, undulating ridge. Tina poised there, a slender white figure against the clearing sky, with her wet, flaxen hair glowing about her thin face and a frail arm outstretched.

"Look, my lady!"

Belesa had already seen it a billowing white sail, filled with the freshening south wind, beating up along the coast a few miles from the point. Her heart skipped a beat; a small thing can loom large in colorless, isolated lives, but Belesa felt a premonition of strange and violent events. She felt that it was not by chance that this sail was wafting up this lonely coast. There was no harbor town to the north, though one sailed to the ultimate shores of ice; and the nearest port to the south must be nearly a thousand miles away. What had brought this stranger to lonely Korvela Bay, as her uncle had named the place when he landed?

Tina pressed close to her mistress, apprehension pinching her thin features. "Who can it be, my lady?" she stammered, the wind whipping color to her pale cheeks. "Is it the man the count fears?"

Belesa looked down at her, her brow shadowed. "Why do you say that, child? How do you know my uncle fears anyone?"

"He must," returned Tina naively, "or he would never have come to hide in this lonely spot. Look, my lady, how fast it comes!"

"We must go and inform my uncle," murmured Belesa. "The fishing boats have not yet gone out, so that none of the men has seen that sail. Get your clothes, Tina. Hurry!"

The child scampered down the low slope to the pool where she had been bathing when she sighted the craft and snatched up the slippers, tunic, and girdle that she had left lying on the sand. She skipped back up the ridge, hopping as she dressed in mid-flight.

Belesa, anxiously watching the approaching sail, caught her hand, and they hurried toward the fort. A few moments after they had entered the gate of the log palisade that inclosed the building, the strident blare of a trumpet startled the workers in the gardens and the men who were opening the boathouse doors to push the fishing boats on their rollers down to the water's edge.

Every man outside the fort dropped his tool or left his task and ran for the stockade without pausing to look about for the cause of the alarm. As the straggling lines of fleeing men converged on the open gate, every head was twisted over its shoulder to gaze fearfully at the dark line of woodland to the east; not one looked seaward.

They thronged through the gate, shouting questions at the sentries who patrolled the footwalk below the up-jutting points of the logs that formed the palisade: "What is it?" "Why are we called in?" "Are the Picts coming?"

For answer, one taciturn man-at-arms in worn leather and rusty steel pointed southward. From his vantage point, the sail was now visible to the men who climbed up on the footwalk, staring toward the sea.

* * *



On a small lookout tower on the roof of the manor house, which was built of logs like the other buildings in the inclosure, Count Valenso of Korzetta watched the on-sweeping sail as it rounded the point of the southern horn. The count was a lean, wiry man of

medium height and late middle age; dark, somber of expression. His trunk-hose and doublet were of black silk, the only color about his costume being that of the jewels that twinkled on his sword hilt and the wine-red cloak thrown carelessly over his shoulders. He nervously twisted his thin black mustache and turned his gloomy eyes on his senescal, a leather-featured man in steel and satin.

"What do you make of it, Galbro?"

"A carack, sir," answered the seneschal. "It is a carack trimmed and rigged like a craft of the Barachan pirates — look there!"

A chorus of cries below them echoed his ejaculation; the ship had cleared the point and was slanting inward across the bay. And all saw the flag that suddenly broke forth from the masthead: a black flag with the outline of a scarlet hand. The people within the stockade stared wildly at that dread emblem. Then all eyes turned up toward the tower, where the master of the fort stood somberly, his cloak whipping about him in the wind.

"It is a Barachan, all right," grunted Galbro. "And unless I am mad, 'tis Strombanni's *Red Hand*. What is he doing on this naked coast?"

"He can mean us no good," growled the count. A glance below showed him that the massive gates had been closed and that the captain of his men-at-arms, gleaming in steel, was directing his men to their stations, some to the ledges, some to the lower loopholes. He was massing his main strength along the western wall, which contained the gate.

A hundred men — soldiers, vassals, and serfs — and their dependents had followed Valenso into exile. Of these, some forty were men-at-arms, wearing helmets and suits of mail, armed with swords, axes, and crossbows. The rest were toilers, without armor save for shirts of toughened leather; but they were brawny stalwarts, skilled in the use of their hunting bows, woodsmen's axes, and boar spears. They took their places, scowling at their hereditary enemies. For more than a century the pirates of the Barachan Isles, a tiny archipelago off the southwestern coast of Zingara, had preyed on the people of the mainland.

The men on the stockade gripped their bows or boar spears and stared somberly at the carack as it swung inshore, its brasswork flashing in the sun. They could see the figures swarming on the deck and hear the lusty yells of the seamen. Steel twinkled along the rail.

The count had retired from the tower, shooping his niece and her eager protégée before him. Having donned helmet and cuirass, he betook himself to the palisade to direct the defense. His subjects watched him with moody fatalism. They intended to sell their lives as dearly as they could, but they had scant hope of victory, in spite of their strong position. They were oppressed by a conviction of doom. More than a year on that naked coast, with the brooding threat of that devil-haunted forest looming forever at their backs, had shadowed their souls with gloomy forebodings. Their women stood silently in the doorways of their huts, inside the stockade, and quieted the clamor of their children.

Belesa and Tina watched eagerly from an upper window in the manor house, and Belesa felt the child's tense little body quiver within the crook of her protecting arm.

"They will cast anchor near the boathouse," murmured Belesa. "Yes! There goes their anchor, a hundred yards offshore. Do not tremble so, child! They cannot take the fort. Perhaps they wish only fresh water and supplies; perhaps a storm blew them into these seas."

"They are coming ashore in the longboat!" said the child. "Oh, my lady, I am afraid! They are big men in armor! Look how the sun strikes fire from their pikes and helmets! Will they eat us?"

Belesa burst into laughter in spite of her apprehension. "Of course not! Who put that idea into your head?"

"Zingelito told me the Barachans eat women."

"He was teasing you. The Barachans are cruel, but they are no worse than the Zingaran renegades who call themselves buccaneers. Zingelito was a buccaneer once."

"He was cruel," muttered the child. "I'm glad the Picts cut his head off."

"Hush, Tina!" Belesa shuddered slightly. "You must not speak that way. Look, the pirates have reached the shore. They line the beach, and one of them is coming toward the fort. That must be Strombanni."



"Ahoy, the fort there!" came a hail in a voice as gusty as the wind. "I come under a flag of truce!"

The count's helmeted head appeared over the points of the palisade. His stern face, framed in steel, surveyed the pirate somberly. Strombanni had halted just within earshot: a big man, bare-headed, with hair of the tawny hue sometimes found in Argos. Of all the sea-rovers who haunted the Barachans, none was more famed for devilry than he.

"Speak!" commanded Valenso. "I have scant desire to converse with one of your breed."

Strombanni laughed with his lips, not with his eyes. "When your galleon escaped me in that squall off the Trallibes last year, I never thought to meet you again on the Pictish coast, Valenso!" said he. "But I wondered at the time what your destination might be. By Mitra, had I known, I should have followed you then! I got the start of my life a little while ago, when I saw your scarlet falcon floating over a fortress where I had thought to see naught but bare beach. You have found it, of course?"

"Found what?" snapped the count impatiently.

"Do not try to dissemble with me!" The pirate's stormy nature showed itself in a flash of impatience. "I know why you came here, and I have come for the same reason. I will not be balked. Where is your ship?"

"That is none of your affair."

"You have none," confidently asserted the pirate. "I see pieces of ship's mast in that stockade. It must have been wrecked somehow, after you landed here. If you'd had a ship, you would have sailed away with your plunder long ago."

"What are you talking about, damn you?" yelled the count. "My plunder? Am I a Barachan, to burn and loot? Even so, what should I loot on this bare coast?"

"That which you came to find," answered the pirate coolly. "The same thing I'm after and mean to have. But I shall be easy to deal

with. Just give me the loot and I'll go my way and leave you in peace."

"You must be mad!" snarled Valenso. "I came here to find solitude and seclusion, which I enjoyed until you crawled out of the sea, you yellow-headed dog. Begone! I did not ask for a parley, and I weary of this empty talk. Take your rogues and go your ways."

"When I go, I'll leave that hovel in ashes!" roared the pirate in a transport of rage. "For the last time: will you give me the loot in return for your lives? I have you hemmed in here, and a hundred and fifty men ready to cut your throats at my word."

For answer, the count made a quick gesture with his hand below the points of the palisade. Almost instantly, a shaft hummed venomously through a loophole and splintered on Strombanni's breastplate. The pirate yelled ferociously, bounded back, and ran toward the beach, with arrows whistling all about him. His men roared and came on like a wave, blades gleaming in the sun.

"Curse you, dog!" raved the count, felling the offending archer with his iron clad fist. "Why did you not strike his throat above the gorget? Ready with your bows, men; here they come!"

But Strombanni checked the headlong rush of his men. The pirates spread out in a long line that overlapped the extremities of the western wall; they advanced warily, loosing their shafts as they came. Although their archery was considered superior to that of the Zingarans, they had to rise to loose their longbows. Meanwhile the Zingarans, protected by their stockade, sent crossbow bolts and hunting arrows back with careful aim.

The long arrows of the Barachans arched over the stockade and quivered upright in the earth. One struck the windowsill over which Belesa watched. Tina cried out and flinched, staring at the vibrating shaft.

The Zingarans sent their missiles in return, aiming and loosing without undue haste. The women had herded the children into their huts and now stoically awaited whatever fate the gods had in store for them.



The Barachans were famed for their furious and headlong style of battling, but they were as wary as they were ferocious and did not intend to waste their strength vainly in direct charges against the ramparts. They crept forward in their widespread formation, taking advantage of every natural depression and bit of vegetation — which was not much, for the ground had been cleared on all sides of the fort against the threat of Pictish raids.

As the Barachans got nearer to the fort, the defenders' archery became more effective. Here and there a body lay prone, its back-piece glinting in the sun and a quarrel shaft standing up from armpit or neck. Wounded men thrashed and moaned.

The pirates were quick as cats, always shifting their position, and they were protected by their light armor. Their constant raking archery was a continual menace to the men in the stockade. Still, it was evident that as long as the battle remained an exchange of archery, the advantage must remain with the sheltered Zingarans.

Down at the boathouse on the beach, however, men were at work with axes. The count cursed sulfurously when he saw the havoc they were making among his boats, which had been built laboriously of planks sawn out of solid logs.

"They're making a mantlet, curse them!" he raged. "A sally now, before they complete it — while they are scattered —"

Galbro shook his head, glancing at the unarmored workers with their awkward pikes. "Their arrows would riddle us, and we should be no match for them in hand-to-hand fighting. We must keep behind our walls and trust to our archery."

"Well enough," growled Valenso, "if we can keep *them* outside our walls."

Time passed while the inconclusive archery duel continued. Then a group of thirty men advanced, pushing before them a great shield made of planks from the boats and the timbers of the boathouse itself. They had found an oxcart and mounted the mantlet on the wheels, which were great solid disks of oak. As they rolled it ponderously before them, it hid them from the sight of the defenders except for glimpses of their moving feet.

It rolled toward the gate, and the straggling line of archers converged toward it, shooting as they ran.

"Shoot!" yelled Valenso, going livid. "Stop them ere they reach the gate!"

A storm of arrows whistled across the palisade and feathered themselves harmlessly in the thick wood. A derisive yell answered the volley. Shafts were finding loopholes now as the rest of the pirates drew nearer; a soldier reeled and fell from the ledge, gasping and choking, with an arrow through his throat.

"Shoot at their feet!" screamed Valenso. "And forty men at the gate with pikes and axes! The rest hold the wall!"

Bolts ripped into the sand before the moving shield. A bloodthirsty howl announced that one had found its target beneath the edge. A man staggered into view, cursing and hopping as he strove to withdraw the quarrel that skewered his foot. In an instant he was feathered by a dozen arrows.

But, with a deep-throated shout, the pirates pushed the mantlet against the gate. Through an aperture in the center of the shield they thrust a heavy, iron-tipped boom, which they had made from the ridgepole of the boathouse. Driven by arms knotted with brawny muscles and backed with bloodthirsty fury, the boom began to thunder against the gate. The massive gate groaned and staggered, while from the stockade bolts poured in a steady stream; some struck home, but the wild men of the sea were afire with fighting lust.

With deep shouts they swung the ram, while from all sides the others closed in, braving the weakened arrow-storm from the walls and shooting back fast and hard.

Cursing like a madman, the count sprang from the wall and ran to the gate, drawing his sword. A clump of desperate men-at-arms closed in behind him, gripping their spears, in another moment the gate would cave in, and they must stop the gap with their bodies.

Then a new note entered the clamor: a trumpet, blaring stridently from the ship. On the crosstree, a figure waved and gesticulated wildly.

The thunder of the ram ceased, and Strombanni's bellow rose above the racket: "Wait! Wait, damn you! *Listen!*"

In the silence that followed that bull's bellow, the blare of the trumpet was plainly heard, and a voice that shouted something that was unintelligible to the people inside the stockade. But Strombanni understood, for his voice was lifted again in profane command. The ram was released, and the mantlet began to recede from the gate as swiftly as it had advanced. Pirates who had been trading shafts with

the defenders began picking up their wounded fellows and helping them hastily back to the beach.

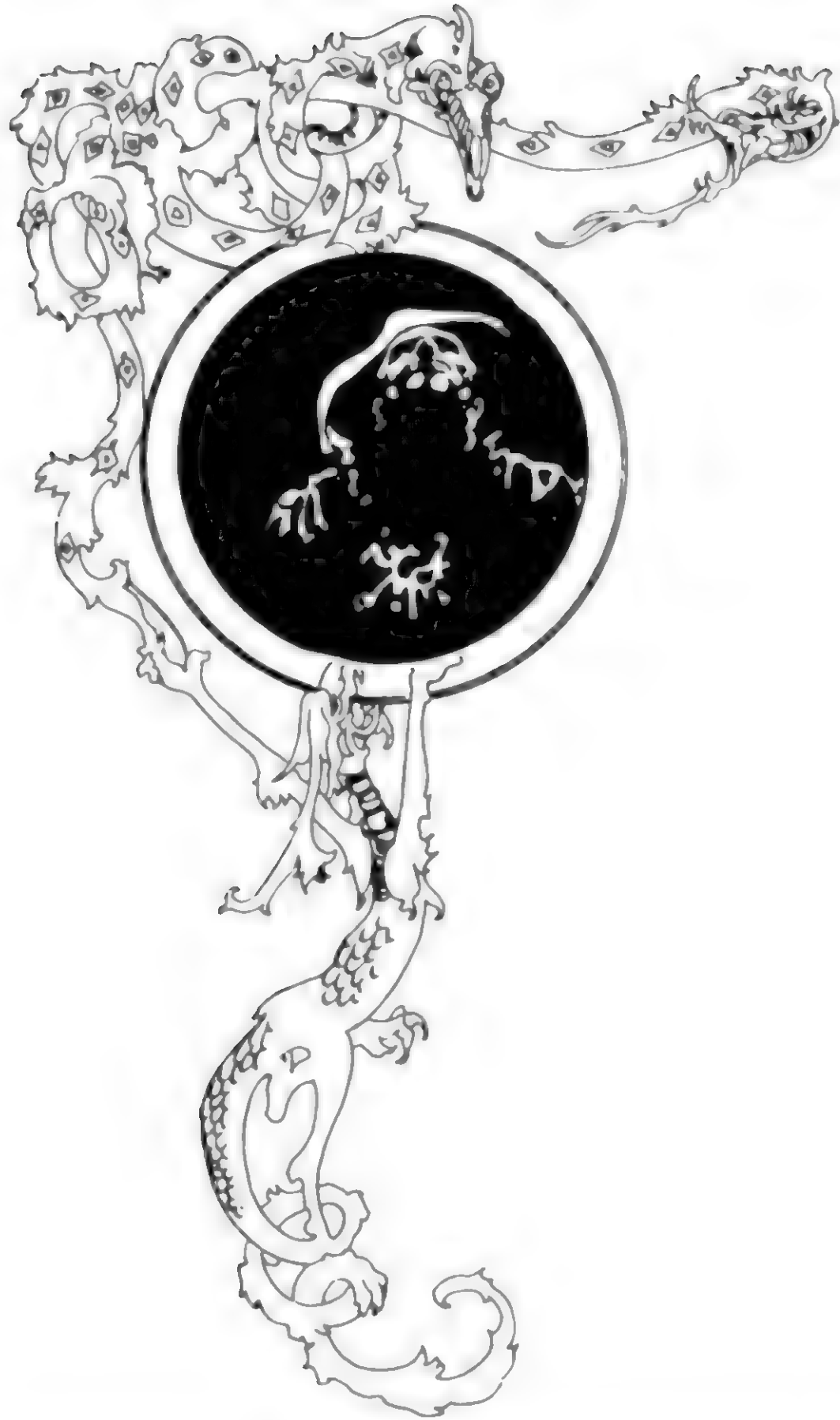
"Look!" cried Tina at her window, jumping up and down in wild excitement, "They flee! All of them! They are running to the beach! Look! They have abandoned the shield! They leap into the longboat and pull for the ship! Oh, my lady, have we won?"

"I think not." Belesa was staring seaward. "Look!"

She threw the curtains aside and leaned from the window. Her clear young voice rose above the amazed shouts of the defenders, who turned their heads in the direction she pointed. They sent up a deep yell as they saw another ship swinging majestically around the southern point. Even as they watched, she broke out the royal flag of Zingara.



Strombanni's pirates were swarming up the sides of their carack and heaving up the anchor. Before the stranger had progressed halfway across the bay, the *Red Hand* was vanishing around the northern horn.



The blue mist had condensed into a monstrous black figure, dimly seen and not quite definite, which filled the hither end of the

cave, blotting out the still, seated figures behind. There was an impression of shagginess, pointed ears, and close-set horns.

Even as the great arms shot out like tentacles toward his throat, the Cimmerian, quick as a flash, struck at them with his Pictish ax. It was like chopping at a trunk of the ebony tree. The force of the blow broke the handle of the tomahawk and sent the copper head flying with a clank against the side of the tunnel; but, so far as the Cimmerian could tell, the blade had not bitten into the flesh of his foe at all. It took more than an ordinary edge to pierce a demon's hide. And then the great fingers closed upon his throat, to break his neck as if it were a reed. Not since he had fought Baal-pteor hand to hand in the temple of Hanuman in Zamboula had Conan felt such a grip upon him.

As the hairy fingers touched his skin, the barbarian tensed the thickly-corded muscles of his massive neck, drawing his head down between his shoulders to give his unnatural foe the least possible purchase. He dropped the knife and the broken hatchet handle, seized the huge black wrists, swung his legs upward and forward, and drove both bare heels with all his might against the chest of the thing, straightening out his long body.



The tremendous impulse of the Cimmerian's mighty back and legs tore his neck loose from that lethal grip and sent him shooting

like an arrow back up the tunnel down which he had come. He landed on the stone floor on his back and flipped over in a back somersault on to his feet, ignoring the bruises and ready to flee or fight as occasion required.

As he stood there, however, glaring with bared teeth at the door to the inner cave, no black, monstrous form shambled out after him. Almost as soon as Conan had wrenched "himself loose, the form had begun to dissolve into the blue mist from which it had condensed. Now it was all gone.

The man stood poised, ready to whirl and bound up the tunnel. The superstitious fears of the barbarian whirled through his mind. Although he was fearless to the point of rashness toward men and beasts, the supernatural could still throw him into terror-stricken panic.

So this was why the Picts had gone! He should have suspected some such danger. He remembered such demonological lore as he had picked up in his youth in cloudy Cimmeria and later in his wanderings over most of the civilized world. Fire and silver were said to be deadly to devils, but he had neither at the moment. Still, if such spirits took gross material form, they were in some measure subject to the limitations of that form. This lumbering monster, for instance, could run no faster than a beast of its general size and shape, and the Cimmerian thought that he could outdistance it if need be.

Plucking up his wavering courage, the man shouted with boyish braggadocio: "Ho there, ugly-face, aren't you coming out?"

No reply; the blue mist swirled in the chamber but remained in its diffused form. Fingering his bruised neck, the Cimmerian recalled a Pictish tale of a demon sent by a wizard to slay a group of strange men from the sea, but who was then confined to that cave by this same wizard lest, having once been conjured across nighted gulfs and given material form, he turn upon those who had snatched him from his native hells and rend them.

Once more, the Cimmerian turned his attention to the chests that lay ranked along the walls of the tunnel . . .



Back at the fort, the count snapped: "Out, quick!" He tore at the bars of the gate, crying: "Drag that mantlet in before these strangers can land!"

"But Strombanni has fled," expostulated Galbro, "and yonder ship is Zingaran."

"Do as I order!" roared Valenso. "My enemies are not all foreigners! Out, dogs, thirty of you, and fetch the mantlet into the stockade!"

Before the Zingaran ship had dropped anchor, about where the pirate ship had docked, Valenso's thirty stalwarts had trundled the device back to the gate and manhandled it sideways through the opening.

Up in the window of the manor house, Tina asked wonderingly: "Why does not the count open the gate and go to meet them? Is he afraid that the man he fears might be on that ship?"

"What mean you, Tina?" asked Belesa uneasily. Although no man to run from a foe, the count had never vouchsafed a reason for his self-exile. But this conviction of Tina's was disquieting, almost uncanny. Tina, however, seemed not to have heard her question.

"The men are back in the stockade," she said. "The gate is closed again and barred. The men still keep their places along the wall. If that ship was chasing Strombanni, why did it not pursue him? It is not a war galley but a carack like the other. Look, a boat is coming ashore. I see a man in the bow, wrapped in a dark cloak."

When the boat had grounded, this man paced in leisurely fashion up the sands, followed by three others. He was a tall, wiry man in black silk and polished steel.



"Halt!" roared the count. "I will parley with your leader, alone!"

The tall stranger removed his helmet and made a sweeping bow. His companions halted, drawing their wide cloaks about them, and behind them the sailors leaned on their oars and stared at the flag floating over the palisade.

When the leader came within easy call of the gate, he said: "Why, surely, there should be no suspicion between gentlemen in these naked seas!"

Valenso stared at him suspiciously. The stranger was dark, with a lean, predatory face and a thin black mustache. A bunch of lace was gathered at his throat, and there was lace on his wrists.

"I know you," said Valenso slowly. "You are Black Zarono, the buccaneer."

Again the stranger bowed with stately elegance. "And none could fail to recognize the red falcon of the Korzettas!"

"It seems this coast has become a rendezvous of all the rogues of the southern seas," growled Valenso. "What do you wish?"

"Come, come, sir!" remonstrated Zarono. "This is a churlish greeting to one who had just rendered you a service. Was not that Argossean dog, Strombanni, just now thundering at your gate? And did he not take to his sea-heels when he saw me round the point?"

"True," grunted the count grudgingly, "although there is little to choose between a pirate and a renegade."

Zarono laughed without resentment and twirled his mustache. "You are blunt in speech, my lord. But I desire only leave to anchor in your bay, to let my men hunt for meat and water in your woods, and, perhaps, to drink a glass of wine myself at your board."

"I see not how I can stop you," growled Valenso. "But understand this, Zarono: no man of your crew shall come within this palisade. If one approaches closer than thirty paces, he shall presently find an arrow through his gizzard. And I charge you to do no harm to my gardens or the cattle in the pens. One steer you may have for fresh meat, but no more. And, in case you think otherwise, we can hold this fort against the ruffians."

"You were not holding it very successfully against Strombanni," the buccaneer pointed out with a mocking smile.

"You'll find no wood to build mantlets this time, unless you fell trees or strip it from your own ship," assured the count grimly. "And your men are not Barachan archers; they're no better bowmen than mine. Besides, what little loot you'd find in this castle would not be worth the price."

"Who speaks of loot and warfare?" protested Zarono. "Nay, my men are sick to stretch their legs ashore, and nigh to scurvy from chewing salt pork. May they come ashore? I guarantee their good conduct."

Valenso grudgingly signified his consent. Zarono bowed, a shade sardonically, and retired with a tread as measured and stately as if he trod the polished crystal floor of the Kordavan royal court — where indeed, unless rumor lied, he had once been a familiar figure.

"Let no man leave the stockade," Valenso ordered Galbro. "I trust not that renegade cur. The fact that he drove Strombanni from our gate is no guarantee that he, too, would not cut our throats."

Galbro nodded. He was well aware of the enmity that existed between the pirates and the Zingaran buccaneers. The pirates were mainly Argossean sailors turned outlaw; to the ancient feud between Argos and Zingara was added, in the case of the freebooters, the rivalry of opposing interests. Both breeds preyed on the shipping and the coastal towns; and they preyed upon each other with equal rapacity.

So no one stirred from the palisade while the buccaneers came ashore, dark-faced men in flaming silk and polished steel, with scarves bound around their heads and golden hoops in their ears. They camped on the beach, a hundred and seventy-odd of them, and Valenso noticed that Zarono posted lookouts on both points. They did not molest the gardens, and the steer designated by Valenso, shouting from the palisade, was driven forth and slaughtered. Fires were kindled on the strand, and a wattled cask of ale was brought ashore and broached.

Other kegs were filled with water from the spring that rose a short distance south of the fort, and men with crossbows in their hands began to straggle toward the woods. Seeing this, Valenso was moved to shout to Zarono, striding back and forth through the camp:

"Do not let your men go into the forest! Take another steer from the pens if you lack enough meat. But if the men go tramping into the woods, they may fall foul of the Picts. Whole tribes of the painted devils live back in the forest. We beat off an attack shortly after we landed, and since then six of my men have been murdered in the forest at one time or another. There's peace between us just now, but it hangs by a thread. Do not risk stirring them up!"

Zarono shot a startled glance at the lowering woods, as if he expected to see a horde of savage figures lurking there. Then he bowed and said: "I thank you for the warning, my lord." He shouted for his men to come back, in a rasping voice that contrasted strangely with his courtly accents when addressing the count.

If Zarono's vision could have penetrated the leafy screen, he would have been even more apprehensive. He would have seen the sinister figure that lurked there, watching the strangers with inscrutable black eyes — a hideously-painted warrior, naked but for his doeskin breechclout, with a hornbill feather drooping over his left ear.

As evening drew on, a thin skim of gray crawled up from the sea-rim and overcast the sky. The sun sank in a wallow of crimson, touching the tips of the black waves with blood. Fog crawled out of the sea and lapped at the feet of the forest, curling about the stockade in smoky wisps. The fires on the beach shone dull crimson through the mist, and the singing of the buccaneers seemed deadened and far away. They had brought old sail canvas from the carack and made shelters along the strand, where beef was still roasting and the ale granted them by their captain was doled out sparingly.

The great gate was shut and barred. Soldiers stolidly tramped the ledges of the palisade, pike on shoulder, beads of moisture glistening on their steel caps. They glanced uneasily at the fires on

the beach and stared with even greater fixity toward the forest, now a vague, dark line in the crawling fog. The compound now lay empty of life — a bare, darkened space. Candles gleamed feebly through the cracks of huts, and light streamed from the windows of the manor. There was silence except for the tread of the sentries, the drip of water from the eaves, and the distant singing of the buccaneers.

Some faint echo of this singing penetrated into the great hall, where Valenso sat at wine with his unsolicited guest.

"Your men make merry, sir," grunted the count.

"They are glad to feel the sand under their feet again," answered Zarono. "It has been a wearisome voyage — aye, a long, stern chase." He lifted his goblet gallantly to the unresponsive girl who sat on his host's right, and drank ceremoniously.

Impassive attendants ranged the walls: soldiers with pikes and helmets, servants in satin coats. Valenso's household in this wild land was a shadowy reflection of the court he had kept in Kordava.

The manor house, as he insisted on calling it, was a marvel for that remote place. A hundred men had worked night and day for months to build it. While its log-walled exterior was devoid of ornamentation, within it was as nearly a copy of Korzetta Castle as possible. The logs that composed the walls of the hall were hidden with heavy silk tapestries, worked in gold. Ship's beams, stained and polished, formed the lofty ceiling. The floor was covered with rich carpets. The broad stair that led up from the hall was likewise carpeted, and its massive balustrade had once been a galleon's rail.

A fire in the wide stone fireplace dispelled the dampness of the night. Candles in the great silver candelabrum in the center of the broad mahogany board lit the hall, throwing long shadows on the stair.

Count Valenso sat at the head of the table, presiding over a company composed of his niece, his piratical guest, Galbro, and the captain of the guard. The smallness of the company emphasized the

proportions of the vast board, where fifty guests might have sat at ease.

"You followed Strombanni?" asked Valenso. "You drove him this far afield?"

"I followed Strombanni," laughed Zarono, "but he was not fleeing from me. Strombanni is not the man to flee from anyone. Nay; he came seeking for something — something I, too, desire."

"What could tempt a pirate or a buccaneer to this naked land?" muttered Valenso, staring into the sparkling contents of his goblet.

"What could tempt a Count of Zingara?" retorted Zarono, an avid light burning in his eyes.

"The rottenness of the royal court might sicken a man of honor," remarked Valenso.

"Korzettas of honor have endured its rottenness with tranquility for several generations," said Zarono bluntly. "My lord, indulge my curiosity: Why did you sell your lands, load your galleon with the furnishings of your castle, and sail over the horizon out of the knowledge of the regent and the nobles of Zingara? And why settle here, when your sword and your name might carve out a place for you in any civilized land?"

Valenso toyed with the golden seal-chain about his neck. "As to why I left Zingara," he said, "that is my own affair. But it was chance that left me stranded here. I had brought all my people ashore, and much of the furnishings you mentioned, intending to build a temporary habitation. But my ship, anchored out there in the bay, was driven against the cliffs of the north point and wrecked by a sudden storm out of the west. Such storms are common enough at certain times of the year. After that, there was naught to do but remain and make the best of it."

"Then you would return to civilization, if you could?"

"Not to Kordava. But perhaps to some far clime — to Vendhya, or even Khitai..."

"Do you not find it tedious here, my lady?" asked Zarono, for the first time addressing himself directly to Belesa.

Hunger to see a new face and hear a new voice had brought the girl to the great hall that night, but now she wished that she had remained in her chamber with Tina. There was no mistaking the meaning in the glance Zaron turned on her. Although his speech was decorous and formal, his expression sober and respectful, it was but a mask through which gleamed the violent and sinister spirit of the man. He could not keep the burning desire out of his eyes when he looked at the aristocratic young beauty in her low-necked satin gown and jeweled girdle.



"There is little diversity here," she answered in a low voice.

"If you had a ship," Zaron bluntly asked his host, "you would abandon this settlement?"

"Perhaps," admitted the count.

"I have a ship," said Zaron. "If we could reach an agreement —"

"What sort of an agreement?" Valenso lifted his head to stare suspiciously at his guest.

"Share and share alike," said Zaron, laying his hand on the board with fingers spread wide, like the legs of a giant spider. The

fingers quivered with nervous tension, and the buccaneer's eyes gleamed with a new light.

"Share what?" Valenso stared at him in evident bewilderment. "The gold I brought with me went down in my ship and, unlike the broken timbers, it did not wash ashore."

"Not that!" Zarono made an impatient gesture. "Let us be frank, my lord. Can you pretend it was chance that caused you to land at this particular spot, with a thousand miles of coast from which to choose?"

"There is no need to pretend," answered Valenso coldly. "My ship's master was Zingelito, formerly a buccaneer. He had sailed this coast and persuaded me to land here, telling me he had a reason he would later disclose. But this reason he never divulged because, the day after he landed, he disappeared into the woods, and his headless body was found later by a hunting party. Obviously he had been ambushed and slain by the Picts."

Zarono stared fixedly at Valenso for a space. "Sink me!" quoth he at last. "I believe you, my lord. A Korzetta has no skill at lying, regardless of his other accomplishments. And I will make you a proposal. I will admit that, when I anchored out there in the bay, I had other plans in mind. Supposing you to have already secured the treasure, I meant to take this fort by strategy and cut all your throats. But circumstances have caused me to change my mind . . ." He cast a glance at Belesa that brought color to her face and made her lift her head indignantly, and continued: "I have a ship to carry you out of exile, with your household and such of your retainers as you shall choose. The rest can fend for themselves."

The attendants along the walls shot uneasy, sidelong glances at one another. Zarono went on, too brutally cynical to conceal his intentions: "But first, you must help me secure the treasure for which I've sailed a thousand miles."

"What treasure, in Mitra's name?" demanded the count angrily. "Now you are yammering like that dog Strombanni."

"Have you ever heard of Bloody Tranicos, the greatest of the Barachan pirates?"

"Who has not? It was he who stormed the island castle of the exiled prince, Tothmekri of Stygia, put the people to the sword, and bore off the treasure the prince had brought with him when he fled from Khemi."

"Aye! And the tale of that treasure brought men of the Red Brotherhood swarming like vultures after carrion — pirates, buccaneers, and even the wild black corsairs from the South. Fearing betrayal by his captains, Tranicos fled northward with one ship and vanished from the knowledge of men. That was nearly a hundred years ago.

"But the tale persists that one man survived that last voyage and returned to the Barachans, only to be captured by a Zingaran war-galley. Before he was hanged, he told his story and drew a map in his own blood, on parchment, which he somehow smuggled out of his captor's reach. This was the tale he told:

"Tranicos had sailed far beyond the paths of shipping, until he came to a bay on a lonely coast, and there he anchored. He went ashore, taking his treasure and eleven of his most trusted captains, who had accompanied him on his ship. Following his orders, the ship sailed away, to return in a week's time and pick up their admiral and his captains. In the meantime, Tranicos meant to hide the treasure somewhere in the vicinity of the bay. The ship returned at the appointed time, but there was no trace of Tranicos and his eleven captains, except for the rude dwelling they had built on the beach.

"This had been demolished, and there were tracks of naked feet about it, but no sign there had been any fighting. Nor was there any trace of the treasure, or any sign to show where it was hidden. The pirates plunged into the forest to search for their chief. Having with them a Bossonian skilled in tracking and woodcraft, they followed the signs of the missing men along old trails running some miles eastward from the shore. Becoming weary and failing to catch up with the admiral, they sent one of their number up a tree to spy, and this one reported that not far ahead a great steep-sided crag or dome

rose like a tower from the forest. They started forward again, but then were attacked by a party of Picts and driven back to their ship. In despair they heaved anchor and sailed away. Before they raised the Barachas, however, a terrific storm wrecked the ship, and only that one man survived.

"That is the tale of the treasure of Tranicos, which men have sought in vain for nearly a century. That the map exists is known, but its whereabouts have remained a mystery.

"I have had one glimpse of that map. Strombanni and Zingelito were with me, and a Nemedian who sailed with the Barachans. We looked upon it in Messantia, where we were skulking in disguise. Somebody knocked over the lamp, and somebody howled in the dark, and when we got the light on again, the old miser who owned the map was dead with a dirk in his heart, and the map was gone, and the night watch was clattering down the street with their pikes to investigate the clamor. We scattered, and each went his own way.

"For years thereafter, Strombanni and I watched each other, each supposing the other had the map. Well, as it turned out, neither had it; but recently word came to me that Strombanni had departed northward, so I followed him. You saw the end of that chase.

"I had but a glimpse at the map as it lay on the old miser's table and could tell nothing about it, but Strombanni's actions show that he knows this is the bay where Tranicos anchored. I believe they hid the treasure on or near that great, rocky hill the scout reported and, returning, were attacked and slain by the Picts. The Picts did not get the treasure. Men have traded up and down this coast a little, and no gold ornament or rare jewel has ever been seen in the possession of the coastal tribes.

"This is my proposal: Let us combine our forces. Strombanni is somewhere within striking distance. He fled because he feared to be pinned between us, but he will return. Allied, however, we can laugh at him. We can work out from the fort, leaving enough men here to hold it if he attacks. I believe the treasure is hidden nearby. Twelve men could not have conveyed it far. We will find it, load it in my ship, and sail for some foreign port where I can cover my past with gold. I

am sick of this life. I want to go back to a civilized land and live like a noble, with riches and slaves and a castle — and a wife of noble blood."

"Well?" demanded the count, slit-eyed with suspicion.

"Give me your niece for my wife," demanded the buccaneer bluntly.

Belesa cried out sharply and started to her feet. Valenso likewise rose, livid, his fingers knotting convulsively about his goblet as if he contemplated hurling it at his guest. Zarono did not move; he sat still, one arm on the table with the fingers hooked like talons. His eyes smoldered with passion and menace.

"You dare!" ejaculated Valenso.

"You seem to forget you have fallen from your high estate, Count Valenso," growled Zarono. "We are not at the Kordavan court, my lord. On this naked coast, nobility is measured by the power of men and arms, and there I rank you. Strangers tread Korzetta Castle, and the Korzetta fortune is at the bottom of the sea. You will die here, an exile, unless I give you the use of my ship.

"You shall have no cause to regret the union of our houses. With a new name and a new fortune, you will find that Black Zarono can take his place among the aristocrats of the world and make a son-in-law of which not even a Korzetta need be ashamed."

"You are mad to think of it!" exclaimed the count violently. "You — who is that?"

A patter of soft-slippered feet distracted his attention. Tina came hurriedly into the hall, hesitated when she saw the count's eyes fixed angrily on her, curtsied deeply, and sidled around the table to thrust her small hands into Belesa's fingers. She was panting slightly, her slippers were damp, and her flaxen hair was plastered down on her head.

"Tina!" exclaimed Belesa anxiously. "Where have you been? I thought you were in your chamber hours ago."

"I was," answered the child breathlessly, "but I missed the coral necklace you gave me . . ." She held it up, a trivial trinket, but prized

beyond all her other possessions because it had been Belesa's first gift to her. "I was afraid you wouldn't let me go if you knew. A soldier's wife helped me out of the stockade and back again, and please, my lady, don't make me tell who she was, because I promised not to. I found my necklace by the pool where I bathed this morning. Please punish me if I have done wrong."

"Tina!" groaned Belesa, clasping the child to her. "I'll not punish you, but you should not have gone outside the palisade, with the buccaneers camped on the beach, and always a chance of Picts skulking about. Let me take you to your chamber and change these damp clothes —"

"Yes, my lady, but first let me tell you about the black man—"

"*What?*" The startling interruption was a cry that burst from Valenso's lips. His goblet clattered to the floor as he caught the table with both hands. If a thunderbolt had struck him, the bearing of the lord of the castle could not have been more horrifyingly altered. His face was livid, his eyes almost starting from his head.

"What did you say?" he panted, glaring wildly at the child, who shrank back against Belesa in bewilderment. "What said you, wench?"

"A b-black man, my lord," she stammered, while Belesa, Zaronb, and the attendants stared at him in amazement. "When I went down to the pool to get my necklace, I saw him. There was a strange moaning in the wind, and the sea whimpered like something afraid, and then he came. He came from the sea in a strange, black boat with blue fire playing all about it, but there was no torch. He drew his boat up on the sands below the south point and strode toward the forest, looking like a giant in the fog — a great, tall man, dark like a Kushite —"



Valenso reeled as if he had received a mortal blow. He clutched at his throat, snapping the golden chain in his violence. With the face of a madman he lurched about the table and tore the child screaming from Belesa's arms.

"You little slut!" he panted. "You lie! You have heard me mumbling in my sleep and have told this lie to torment me! Say that you lie before I tear the skin from your back!"

"Uncle!" cried Belesa in outraged bewilderment, trying to free Tina from his grasp. "Are you mad? What are you about?"

With a snarl, he tore her hand from his arm and spun her staggering into the arms of Galbro, who received her with a leer he made little effort to disguise.

"Mercy, my lord!" sobbed Tina. "I did not lie!"

"I say you lied!" roared Valenso. "Gebellez!"

The stolid serving-man seized the trembling youngster and stripped her with one brutal wrench that tore her scanty garments from her body. Wheeling, he drew her slender arms over his shoulders, lifting her writhing feet clear of the floor.

"Uncle!" shrieked Belesa, writhing vainly in Galbro's lustful grasp. "You are mad! You cannot — oh, you cannot —" The voice choked in her throat as Valenso caught up a jewel-handled riding whip and brought it down across the child's frail body with a savage force that left a red weal across her naked shoulders,

Belesa moaned, sick with the anguish in Tina's shriek. The world had suddenly gone mad. As in a nightmare, she saw the stolid beast-faces of the soldiers and the servants, reflecting neither pity nor sympathy. Zarono's faintly sneering visage was part of the nightmare. Nothing in that crimson haze was real except Tina's naked white body, crisscrossed with red welts from shoulders to knees; no sound real except the child's sharp cries of agony and the panting gasps of Valenso as he lashed away with the staring eyes of a madman, shrieking:

"You lie! You lie! Curse you, you lie! Admit your guilt, or I will flay your stubborn body! *He* could not have followed me here ..."

"Oh, have mercy, my lord!" screamed the child, writhing vainly on the brawny servant's back and too frantic with fear and pain to have the wit to save herself by a lie. Blood trickled in crimson beads down her quivering thighs. "I saw him! I lie not! Mercy! Please! Aaah!"



"You fool! *You fool!*" screamed Belesa. "Do you not see she is telling the truth? Oh, you beast! Beast! Beast!"

Some shred of sanity seemed to return to the brain of Count Valenso of Korzetta. Dropping the whip, he reeled back against the table, clutching blindly at its edge. He shook as with an ague. His hair was plastered across his forehead in dank strands, and sweat dripped from his livid countenance, which was like a carved mask of Fear. Tina, released by Gebellez, slipped to the floor in a whimpering heap. Belesa tore free from Galbro, rushed to her, sobbing, and fell on her knees. Gathering the pitiful waif in her arms, she lifted a terrible face to her uncle, to pour upon him the vials of her wrath — but he was not looking at her. He seemed to have forgotten both her and his victim. In a daze of incredulity, she heard him say to the buccaneer:

"I accept your offer, Zaron. In Mitra's name, let us find this accursed treasure and begone from this damned coast!"

At this, the fire of her fury sank to ashes. In stunned silence, she lifted the sobbing child in her arms and carried her up the stair. A glance backward showed Valenso, crouching at the table, gulping wine from a huge goblet, which he gripped in both shaking hands, while Zaron towered over him like a somber predatory bird — puzzled at the turn of events but quick to take advantage of the shocking change that had come over the count. He was talking in a low, decisive voice, and Valenso nodded in mute agreement, like one who scarcely heeds what is being said. Galbro stood back in the shadows, chin pinched between forefinger and thumb, and the attendants along the walls glanced furtively at one another, bewildered by their lord's collapse.



Up in her chamber, Belesa laid the half-fainting girl on the bed and set herself to wash and apply soothing ointments to the weals

and cuts on her tender skin. Tina gave herself up in complete submission to her mistress's hands, moaning faintly. Belesa felt as if her world had fallen about her ears. She was sick and bewildered, overwrought, her nerves quivering from the brutal shock of what she had witnessed. Fear of and hatred for her uncle grew in her soul. She had never loved him; he was hard, grasping, and avid, apparently without natural affection. But she had considered him just and fearless. Revulsion shook her at the memory of his staring eyes and bloodless face. Some terrible fear had aroused his frenzy, and, because of this fear, Valenso had brutalized the only creature she had to love and cherish. Because of that fear he was selling her, his niece, to an infamous outlaw. What lay behind this madness? Who was the black man Tina had seen?

The child muttered in semi-delirium: "I lied not, my lady! Indeed I did not! 'Twas a black man in a black boat that burned like blue fire on the water! A tall man, almost as dark as a Kushite, wrapped in a black cloak! I was afraid when I saw him, and my blood ran cold. He left his boat on the sands and went into the forest. Why did the count whip me for seeing him?"

"Hush, Tina," soothed Belesa. "Lie quietly. The smarting will soon pass."

The door opened behind her, and she whirled, snatching up a jeweled dagger. The count stood in the door, and her flesh crawled at the sight. He looked years older; his face was gray and drawn, and his eyes stared in a way that roused fear in her bosom. She had never been close to him; now she felt as though a gulf separated them. He was not her uncle who stood there, but a stranger come to menace her.

She lifted the dagger. "If you touch her again," she whispered from dry lips, "I swear before Mitra that I will sink this blade in your breast."

He did not heed her. "I have posted a strong guard about the manor," he said. "Zarono brings his men into the stockade tomorrow. He will not sail until he has found the treasure. When he finds it, we shall sail at once for some port to be decided upon."

"And you will sell me to him?" she whispered. "In Mitra's name
—"

He fixed upon her a gloomy gaze in which all considerations but his own self-interest had been crowded out. She shrank before it, seeing in it the frantic cruelty that possessed the man in his mysterious fear.

"You shall do as I command," he said presently, with no more human feeling in his voice than there is in the ring of flint on steel. And, turning, he left the chamber. Blinded by a sudden rush of horror, Belesa fell fainting beside the couch where Tina lay.





4. A Black Drum Droning



Belesa never knew how long she lay crushed and senseless. She was first aware of Tina's arms about her and the sobbing of the child

in her ear. Mechanically she straightened herself and drew the child into her arms. She sat there, dry-eyed, staring unseeingly at the flickering candle. There was no sound in the castle. The singing of the buccaneers on the strand had ceased. Dully, almost impersonally she reviewed her problem.

Valenso was mad, driven frantic by the story of the mysterious black man. It was to escape this stranger that he wished to abandon the settlement and flee with Zaron. That much was obvious. Equally obvious with the fact that he was ready to sacrifice her in exchange for the opportunity to escape. In the blackness of spirit which surrounded her she saw no glint of light. The serving men were dull or callous brutes, their women stupid and apathetic. They would neither dare nor care to help her. She was utterly helpless.

Tina lifted her tear-stained face as if she were listening to the prompting of some inner voice. The child's understanding of Belesa's inmost thoughts was almost uncanny, as was her recognition of the inexorable drive of Fate and the only alternative left to the weak.

"We must go, my lady!" she whispered. "Zaron shall not have you. Let us go far away into the forest. We shall go until we can go no further, and then we shall lie down and die together."

That tragic strength is the last refuge of the weak entered Belesa's soul. It was the only escape from the shadows that had been closing in upon her since that day when they fled from Zingara.

"We will go, child."

She rose and was fumbling for a cloak, when an exclamation from Tina brought her about. The girl was on her feet, a finger to her lips, her eyes wide and bright with terror.

"What is it, Tina?" The child's expression of fright induced Belesa to pitch her voice to a whisper, and a nameless apprehension crawled over her.

"Someone outside in the hall," whispered Tina, clutching her arm convulsively. "He stopped at our door, then went on toward the count's chamber at the other end."

"Your ears are keener than mine," murmured Belesa. "But there is nothing strange in that. It was the count himself, perchance, or Galbro."

She moved to open the door, but Tina threw her arms frantically about her neck, and Belesa felt the wild beating of her heart. "No, no, my lady! Open not the door! I am afraid! I do not know why, but I feel that some evil thing is skulking near us!"

Impressed, Belesa patted her reassuringly and reached a hand toward the metal disk that masked the peephole in the center of the door.

"He is coming back!" quavered Tina. "I hear him!"

Belesa heard something, too — a curious, stealthy pad, which she knew, with a chill of nameless fear, was not the step of anyone she knew. Nor was it the step of Zarono, or any booted man. Could it be the buccaneer, gliding along the hallway on bare, stealthy feet, to slay his host while he slept? She remembered the soldiers on guard below. If the buccaneer had remained in the manor for the night, a man-at-arms would be posted before his chamber door. But who was that sneaking along the corridor? None slept upstairs besides herself, Tina, the Count, and Galbro.

With a quick motion, she extinguished the candle, so that it should not shine through the peephole, and pushed aside the copper disk. All the lights in the hall — ordinarily lighted by candles — were out. Someone was moving along the darkened corridor. She sensed rather than saw a dim bulk moving past her doorway, but she could make nothing of its shape except that it was manlike. A chill wave of terror swept over her; she crouched dumb, incapable of the scream that froze behind her lips. It was not such terror as her uncle now inspired in her, or fear like her fear of Zarono, or even of the brooding forest. It was blind, unreasoning horror that laid an icy hand on her soul and froze her tongue to her palate.



The figure passed on to the stairhead, where it was limned momentarily against the faint glow that came up from below. It was

a man, but not any man such as Belesa was familiar with. She had an impression of a shaven head with aloof, aquiline features and a glossy, brown skin, darker than that of her swarthy countrymen. The head towered on broad, massive shoulders swathed in a black cloak. Then the intruder was gone.

She crouched there in the darkness, awaiting the outcry that would announce that the soldiers in the great hall had seen the intruder. But the manor remained silent. Somewhere a wind wailed shrilly; that was all.

Belesa's hands were moist with perspiration as she groped to relight the candle. She was still shaken with horror, although she could not decide just what there had been about that black figure etched against the red glow that had roused this frantic loathing in her soul. She only knew that the sight had robbed her of all her new-found resolution. She was demoralized, incapable of action.

The candle flared up, illuminating Tina's white face in the yellow glow.

"It was the black man!" whispered Tina. "I know! My blood turned cold, just at it did when I saw him on the beach. There are soldiers downstairs; why did they not see him? Shall we go and tell the count?"

Belesa shook her head. She did not care to repeat the scene that had ensued upon Tina's first mention of the black man. At any event, she dared not venture out into the darkened hallway.

"We dare not go into the forest!" shuddered Tina. "He will be lurking there."

Belesa did not ask the girl how she knew the black man would be in the forest; it was the logical hiding-place for any evil thing, man or devil. And she knew that Tina was right; they dared not leave the fort now. Her determination, which had not faltered at the prospect of certain death, gave way at the thought of traversing those gloomy woods with that dark, sinister creature at large among them. Helplessly she sat down and sank her face in her hands.

Tina slept, presently, on the couch. Tears sparkled on her long lashes; she moved her smarting body uneasily in her restless slumber. Belesa watched.

Toward dawn, Belesa was aware of a stifling quality in the atmosphere; she heard a low rumble of thunder somewhere off to seaward. Extinguishing the candle, which had burned to its socket, she went to the window whence she could see both the ocean and a belt of the forest behind the fort.

The fog had disappeared, and along the eastern horizon ran a thin, pale streak that presaged dawn. But out to sea, a dusky mass was rising from the horizon. From it, lightning flickered and the low thunder growled. An answering rumble came from the black woods.

Startled, Belesa turned and stared at the forest, a brooding black rampart. A strange, rhythmic pulsing came to her ears — a droning reverberation that was not the roll of a Pictish drum.

"A drum!" sobbed Tina, spasmodically opening and closing her fingers in her sleep. "The black man — beating on black drum — in the black woods! Oh, Mitra save us!"

Belesa shuddered. The black cloud on the western horizon writhed and billowed, swelling and expanding. She stared in amazement, for the previous summer there had been no storms on this coast at this time of year, and she had never seen a cloud like that one.

It came boiling up over the world-rim in great boiling masses of blackness, veined with blue fire. It rolled and billowed with the wind in its belly. Its thundering made the air vibrate. And another sound mingled awesomely with the reverberations of the thunder — the voice of the wind, which raced before its coming. The inky horizon was torn and convulsed in the lightning-flashes. Afar to sea she saw the white-capped waves racing before the wind; she heard its droning roar, increasing in volume as it swept shoreward.

But, as yet, no wind stirred on the land. The air was hot, breathless. There was a sensation of unreality about the contrast: out

there, wind and thunder and chaos sweeping inland; but here, stifling stillness. Somewhere below her a shutter slammed, startling in the tense silence, and a woman's voice was lifted, shrill with alarm. Most of the people of the fort, however, seemed to be sleeping, unaware of the oncoming hurricane.

She realized that she still heard that mysterious, droning drum-beat. She stared toward the black forest, her flesh crawling. She could see nothing, but some obscure intuition prompted her to visualize a black, hideous figure squatting under black branches and beating out a nameless incantation on a drum of exotic design.



Desperately she shook off the ghoulish conviction and looked seaward, as a blaze of lightning split the sky. Outlined against its

glare, she saw the masts of Zarono's ship; she saw the tents of the buccaneers on the beach, the sandy ridges of the south point, and the rocky cliffs of the north point as plainly as by a midday sun. Louder and louder rose the roar of the wind, and now the manor was awake. Feet came pounding up the stair, and Zarono's voice yelled, edged with fright. Doors slammed, and Valenso answered, shouting to be heard above the roar of the elements.

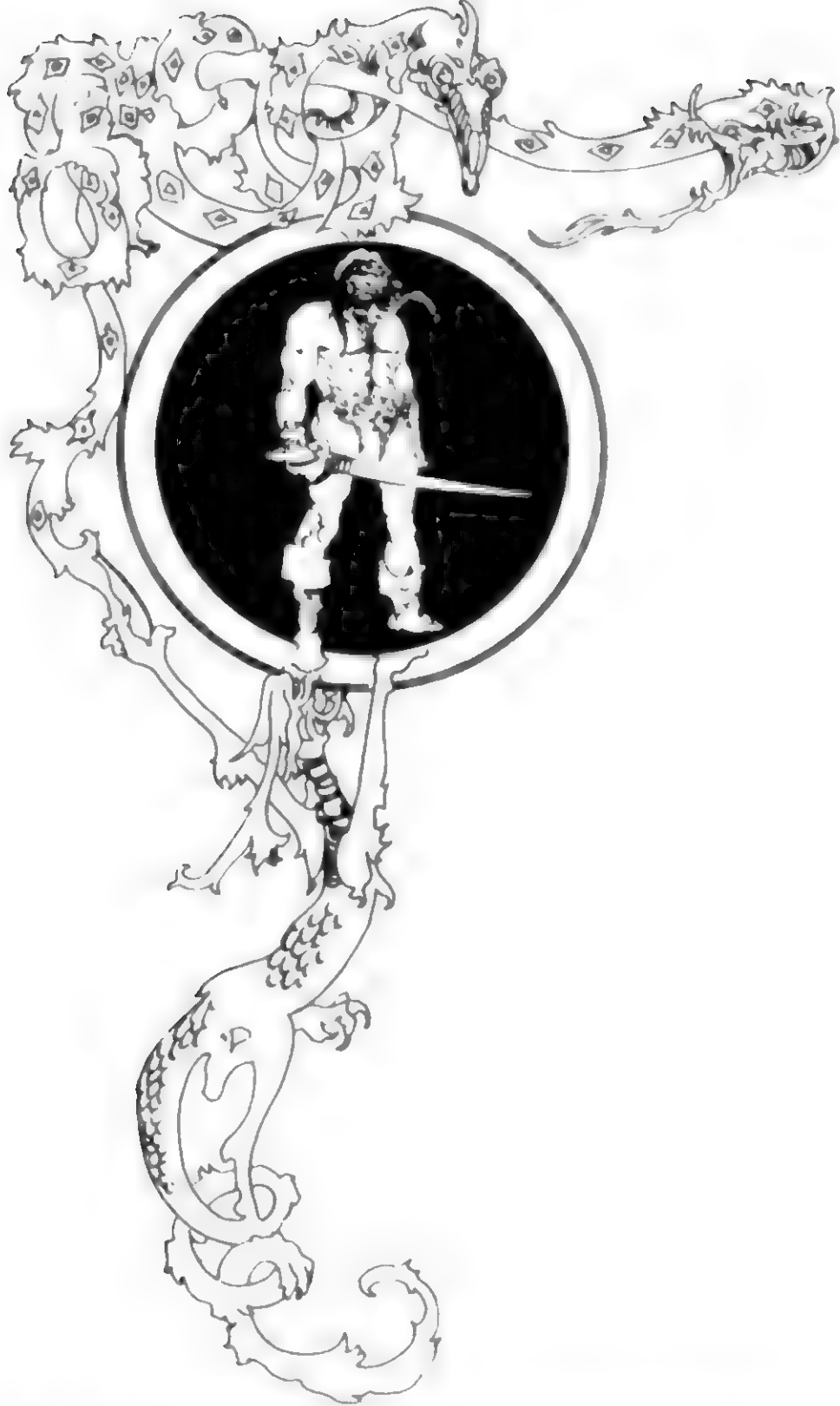
"Why didn't you warn me of a storm from the west?" howled the buccaneer. "If the anchors hold not — "

"A storm has never come from the west before, at this time of year!" shrieked Valenso, rushing from his chamber in his nightshirt, his face livid and his hair standing stiffly on end. "This is the work of —" His words were lost as he raced madly up the ladder that led to the lookout tower, followed by the cursing buccaneer.

Belesa crouched at her window, awed and deafened. Louder and louder rose the wind, until it drowned all other sound — all except that maddening drone of a drum, which now rose like an inhuman chant of triumph. The storm roared inshore, driving before it a foaming league-long crest of white. Then all hell and destruction were loosed on that coast. Rain fell in driving torrents, sweeping the beaches with blind frenzy. The wind hit like a thunderclap, making the timbers of the fort quiver. The surf roared over the sands, drowning the coals of the fires the seamen had built.

In the glare of lightning Belesa saw, through the curtain of the slashing rain, the tents of the buccaneers whipped to ribbons and whirled away; saw the men themselves staggering toward the fort, beaten almost to the sands by the fury of the blast. And limned against the blue glare she saw Zarono's ship, ripped loose from her moorings, driven headlong against the jagged rocks that jutted up to receive her.





5. A Man from the Wilderness

The storm had spent its fury; dawn broke in a clear, blue, rain-washed sky. Bright-hued birds lifted a swelling chorus from the trees, on whose broad leaves beads of water sparkled like diamonds, quivering in the gentle morning breeze.

At a small stream that wound over the sands to join the sea, hidden beyond a fringe of trees and shrubs, a man bent to lave his hands and face. He performed his ablutions after the manner of his kind, grunting lustily and splashing like a buffalo. But in the midst of these splash-ings, he suddenly lifted his head, his tawny hair dripping and water running in rivulets over his brawny shoulders. For a second he crouched in a listening attitude, then was on his feet facing inland, sword in hand, all in one motion. Then he froze, glaring wide-mouthed.

A man even bigger than himself was striding toward him over the sands, making no attempt at stealth. The pirate's eyes widened as he stared at the close-fitting silk breeches, the high flaring-topped boots, the wide-skirted coat, and the headgear of a hundred years ago. There was a broad cutlass in the stranger's hand and unmistakable purpose in his approach.



The pirate went pale as recognition blazed in his eyes. "You!" he ejaculated unbelievably. "By Mitra, *you!*"

Oaths streamed from his lips as he heaved up his cutlass. The birds rose in flaming showers from the trees as the clang of steel interrupted their song. Blue sparks flew from the hacking blades, and the sand grated and ground under the stamping boot heels. Then the clash of steel ended in a chopping crunch, and one man went to his knees with a choking gasp. The hilt escaped his nerveless hand; he slid full-length on the sand, which reddened with his blood. With a dying effort, he fumbles at his girdle and drew something from it, tried to lift it to his mouth, then stiffened convulsively and went limp.

The conqueror bent and ruthlessly tore the stiffening fingers from the object they crumpled in their desperate grasp.

Zarono and Valenso stood on the beach, staring at the driftwood that their men were gathering — spars, pieces of mast, broken timbers. So savagely had the storm hammered Zarono's ship against the low cliffs that most of the salvage was matchwood. A short distance behind them stood Belesa, listening to their conversation with one arm around Tina. Belesa was pale and listless, apathetic to whatever Fate held in store for her. She heard what the men said, but with little interest. She was crushed by the realization that she was but a pawn in the game, however it was to be played out — whether it was to be a wretched life, dragged out on that desolate coast, or a return effected somehow to some civilized land.

Zarono cursed venomously, but Valenso seemed dazed. "This is not the time of year for storms from the west," muttered the count, staring with haggard eyes at the men dragging the wreckage up on the beach. "It was not chance that brought that storm out of the deep to splinter the ship in which I meant to escape. Escape? I am caught like a rat in a trap, as it was meant. Nay, we are all trapped rats —"

"I know not whereof you speak," snarled Zarono, giving a vicious yank at his mustache. "I've been unable to get any sense out of you since that flaxen-haired slut upset you so last night with her tale of black men coming out of the sea. But I do know that I'll not spend my life on this cursed coast. Ten of my men went to Hell in the ship,

but I have a hundred and sixty more. You have a hundred. There are tools in your fort and plenty of trees in yonder forest We'll build a ship. I'll set men to cutting down trees as soon as they get this drift out of reach of the waves."

"It will take months," muttered Valenso.

"Well, how better to employ our time? We're here, and unless we build a ship we shall never get away. We shall have to rig up some kind of sawmill, but I've never encountered anything yet that balked me for long. I hope the storm smashed that Argossean dog Strombanni to bits! While we're building the ship, we'll hunt for old Tranicos's loot."

"We shall never complete your ship," said Valenso somberly.

Zarono turned on him angrily. "Will you talk sense? *Who* is this accursed black man?"

"Accursed indeed," said Valenso, staring seaward. "A shadow of mine own red-stained past, risen up to hound me to Hell. Because of him, I fled Zingara, hoping to lose my trail in the great ocean. But I should have known he would smell me out at last."

"If such a man came ashore, he must be hiding in the woods," groaned Zarono. "We'll rake the forest and hunt him out."

Valenso laughed harshly. "Seek rather for a shadow that drifts before a cloud that hides the moon; grope in the dark for an asp; follow a mist that steals out of the swamp at midnight."

Zarono cast him an uncertain look, obviously doubting his sanity. "Who is this man? Have done with ambiguity."

"The shadow of my own mad cruelty and ambition; a horror come out of the lost ages — no man of common flesh and blood, but a —"

"Sail ho!" bawled the lookout on the northern point.

Zarono wheeled, and his voice slashed the wind. "Do you know her?"

"Aye!" the reply came back faintly. " 'Tis the *Red Hand*!"

Zarono cursed like a wild man. "Strombanni! The devils take care of their own! How could he ride out that blow?" The buccaneer's voice rose to a yell that carried up and down the strand. "Back to the fort, you dogs!"

Before the *Red Hand*, somewhat battered in appearance, nosed around the point, the beach was bare of human life, the palisade bristling with helmets and scarfbound heads. The buccaneers accepted the alliance with the easy adaptability of adventurers, and the count's henchmen with the apathy of serfs.

Zarono ground his teeth as a longboat swung leisurely in to the beach, and he sighted the tawny head of his rival in the bow. The boat grounded, and Strombanni started toward the fort alone.

Some distance away, he halted and shouted in a bull's bellow that carried clearly in the still morning: "Ahoy, the fort! I would parley!"

"Well, why in Hell don't you!" snarled Zarono.

"The last time I approached under a flag of truce, an arrow broke on my brisket!" roared the pirate.

"You asked for it," said Valenso. "I gave you a fair warning to get away from us."

"Well, I want a promise that it shan't happen again!"

"You have my promise!" called Zarono with a sardonic smile.

"Damn your promise, you Zingaran dog! I want Valenso's word."

A measure of dignity remained to the count. There was an edge of authority to his voice as he answered: "Advance, but keep your men back. You shall not be shot at."

"That's enough for me," said Strombanni instantly. "Whatever a Korzetta's sins, you can trust his word."

He strode forward and halted under the gate, laughing at the hate-darkened visage Zarono thrust over at him.

"Well, Zarono," he taunted, "you are a ship shorter than you were when last I saw you! But you Zingarans were never sailors."

"How did you save your ship, you Messantian gutterscum?" snarled the buccaneer.

"There's a cove some miles to the north, protected by a high-ridged arm of land, which broke the force of the gale," answered Strombanni, "I was anchored behind it. My anchors dragged, but they held me off the shore."

Zarono scowled blackly; Valenso said nothing. The count had not known of this cove, for he had done scant exploring of his domain. Fear of the Picts, lack of curiosity, and the need to drive his people to their work had kept him and his men near the fort.

"I come to make a trade," said Strombanni easily.

"We've naught to trade with you save sword-strokes," growled Zarono.

"I think otherwise," grinned Strombanni, thin-lipped. "You showed your intentions when you murdered Galacus, my first mate, and robbed him. Until this morning, I supposed that Valenso had Trnicos's treasure. But, if either of you had had it, you wouldn't have gone to the trouble of following me and killing my mate to get the map."

"The map?" Zarono ejaculated, stiffening.

"Oh, dissemble not with me!" laughed Strombanni, but anger blazed blue in his eyes. "I know you have it. Picts don't wear boots!"

"But —" began the count, nonplussed; then he fell silent as Zarono nudged him.

"And if we have the map," said Zarono, "what have you to trade that we might require?"

"Let me come into the fort," suggested Strombanni. "There we can talk."

He was not so obvious as to glance at the men peering at them from along the wall, but his listeners understood. Strombanni had a ship. That fact would figure in any bargain or battle. But, regardless of who commanded it, it would carry just so many. Whoever sailed

away in it, some would be left behind. A wave of tense speculation ran along the silent throng at the palisade.

"Your men shall stay where they are," warned Zarono, indicating the boat drawn up on the beach and the ship anchored out in the bay.

"Aye. But think not to seize me and hold me for a hostage!" He laughed grimly. "I want Valenso's word that I shall be allowed to leave the fort alive and unhurt within the hour, whether we come to terms or not."

"You have my pledge," answered the count.

"All right, then. Open that gate and let's talk plainly." The gate opened and closed; the leaders vanished from sight. The common men of both parties resumed their silent surveillance of each other: the men on the palisade, the men squatting beside their boat, with a broad stretch of sand between; and, beyond a strip of blue water, the carack with steel caps glinting along her rail.

On the broad stair, above the great hall, Belesa and Tina crouched, ignored by the men below. These sat about the broad table: Valenso, Galbro, Zarono, and Strombanni. But for them, the hall was empty.

Strombanni gulped his wine and set the empty goblet on the table. The frankness suggested by his bluff countenance was belied by the dancing lights of cruelty and treachery in his wide eyes. But he spoke bluntly enough.

"We all want the treasure old Tranicos hid somewhere near this bay," he said abruptly. "Each has something the others need. Valenso has laborers, supplies, and a stockade to shelter us from the Picts. You, Zarono, have my map. I have a ship."

"What I should like to know," remarked Zarono, "is this: If you've had that map all these years, why came you not after the loot sooner?"

"I had it not. It was that dog, Zingelito, who knifed the old miser in the dark and stole the map. But he had neither ship nor crew, and

it took him more than a year to get them. When he did come after the treasure, the Picts prevented his landing, and his men mutinied and made him sail back to Zingara. One of them stole the map from him and recently sold it to me."

"That was why Zingelito recognized the bay," muttered Valenso.

"Did that dog lead you here, count?" asked Strombanni. "I might have guessed it. Where is he?"

"Doubtless in Hell, since he was once a buccaneer. The Picts slew him, evidently while he was searching the woods for the treasure."

"Good!" approved Strombanni heartily. "Well, I don't know how you knew my mate was carrying the map. I trusted him, and the men trusted him more than they did me, so I let him keep it. But this morning he wandered inland with some of the others and got separated from them. We found him sworded to death near the beach, and the map gone. The men were ready to accuse me of killing him, but I showed the fools the tracks left by his slayer and proved to them that my feet wouldn't fit them. And I knew it wasn't any one of the crew, because none of them wears boots that make a track of that sort And Picts wear no boots at all. So it had to be a Zingaran.

"Well, you have the map, but you have not the treasure. If you had it, you wouldn't have let me inside the stockade. I have you penned up in this fort. You can't get out to look for the loot, and even if you did get it you have no ship to get away in.

"Now, here's my proposal: Zarono, give me the map. And you, Valenso, give me fresh meat and other supplies. My men are nigh to scurvy after the long voyage. In return I'll take you three men, the Lady Belesa, and her girl, and set you ashore within reach of some Zingaran port — or I'll put Zarono ashore near some buccaneer rendezvous if he prefers, since doubtless a noose awaits him in Zingara. And, to clinch the bargain, I'll give each of you a handsome share in the treasure."

The buccaneer tugged meditatively at his mustache. He knew that Strombanni would not keep any such pact, if made. Nor did

Zarono even consider agreeing to his proposal. To refuse bluntly, however, would be to force the issue to a clash of arms. He sought his agile brain for a plan to outwit the pirate. He wanted Strombanni's ship as avidly as he desired the lost treasure.

"What's to prevent us from holding you captive and forcing your men to give us your ship in exchange for you?" he asked.

Strombanni laughed. "Think you I'm a fool? My men have orders to heave up the anchors and sail hence if I do not appear within the hour, or if they suspect treachery. They'd not give you the ship if you skinned me alive on the beach. Besides, I have the count's word."

"My pledge is not straw," said Valenso somberly. "Have done with threats, Zarono."

Zarono did not reply. His mind was wholly absorbed in the problems of getting possession of Strombanni's ship and of continuing the parley without betraying the fact that he did not have the map. He wondered who in Mitra's name *did* have the map.

"Let me take my men away with me on your ship when we sail," he said. "I cannot desert my faithful followers —"

Strombanni snorted. "Why don't you ask for my cutlass to slit my gullet with? Desert your faithful — bah! You'd desert your brother to the Devil if you could gain anything by it. No! You shall not bring enough men aboard to give you a chance to mutiny and take my ship."

"Give us a day to think it over," urged Zarono, fighting for time.

Strombanni's heavy fist banged on the table, making the wine dance in the goblets. "No, by Mitra! Give me my answer now!"

Zarono was on his feet, his black rage submerging his craftiness. "You Barachan dog! I'll give you your answer — in your guts . . ."

He tore aside his cloak and caught at his sword hilt. Strombanni heaved up with a roar, his chair crashing backward to the floor. Valenso sprang up, spreading his arms between them as they faced each other across the board with jutting jaws close together, blades half drawn, and faces convulsed. "Gentlemen, have done! Zarono, he has my pledge —"

"The foul fiends gnaw your pledge!" snarled Zarono.

"Stand from between us, my lord," growled the pirate, his voice thick with lust for killing. "Your word was that I should not be treacherously entreated. It shall be considered no violation of your pledge for this dog and me to cross swords in equal play."

"Well spoken, Strom!" said a deep, powerful voice behind them, vibrant with grim amusement. All wheeled and glared open-mouthed. Up on the stair, Belesa started up with an involuntary exclamation.

A man strode out of the hangings that masked the chamber door and advanced toward the table without haste or hesitation. Instantly he dominated the group, and all felt the situation subtly charged with a new, dynamic atmosphere.



The stranger was taller and more powerfully built than either of the freebooters, yet for all his size he moved with pantherish suppleness in his high, flaring-topped boots. His thighs were cased in

close-fitting breeches of white silk. His wide-skirted, sky-blue coat was open to reveal an open-necked, white silken shirt beneath, and the scarlet sash that girded his waist. His coat was adorned with acorn-shaped silver buttons, gilt-worked cuffs and pocket flaps, and a satin collar. A lacquered hat completed a costume obsolete by nearly a hundred years. A heavy cutlass hung at the wearer's hip.

"Conan!" ejaculated both freebooters together, and Valenso and Galbro caught their breath at that name.

"Who else?" The giant strode up to the table, laughing sardonically at their amazement.

"What — what do you here?" stuttered the senescal. "How came you here, uninvited and unannounced?"

"I climbed the palisade on the east side while you fools were arguing at the gate," Conan answered, speaking Zingaran with a barbarous accent. "Every man in the fort was craning his neck westward. I entered the manor while Strombanni was being let in at the gate. Ever since, I've been in that chamber there, eavesdropping."

"I thought you were dead," said Zarono slowly. "Three years ago, the shattered hull of your ship was sighted off a reefy coast, and you were heard of on the Main no more."

"I didn't drown with my crew," answered Conan. " 'Twill take a bigger ocean than that one to drown me. I swam ashore and tried a spell of mercenarying among the black kingdoms; and since then I've been soldiering for the king of Aquilonia. You might say I have become respectable," he grinned wolfishly, "or at least that I had until a recent difference with that ass Numedides. And now to business, fellow thieves."

Up on the stair, Tina was clutching Belesa in her excitement and staring through the balustrade with all her eyes. "Conan! My lady, it is Conan! Look! Oh, look!"

Belesa was looking, as though she beheld a legendary character in the flesh. Who of all the sea-folk had not heard the wild, bloody tales told of Conan, the wild rover who had once been a captain of

the Barachan pirates, and one of the greatest scourges of the sea? A score of ballads celebrated his ferocious, audacious exploits. The man could not be ignored; irresistibly he had stalked into the scene, to form another, dominant element in the tangled plot. And, in the midst of her frightened fascination, Belesa's feminine instinct prompted the speculation as to Conan's attitude toward her. Would it be like Strombanni's brutal indifference or Zaron's violent desire?

Valenso was recovering from the shock of finding a stranger within his very hall. He knew that Conan was a Cimmerian, born and bred in the wastes of the far north, and therefore not amenable to the physical limitations that controlled civilized men. It was not so strange that he had been able to enter the fort undetected, but Valenso flinched at the reflection that other barbarians might duplicate that feat — the dark, silent Picts, for instance.

"What would you here?" he demanded. "Did you come from the sea?"

"I came from the woods." The Cimmerian jerked his head toward the east.

"You have been living with the Picts?" Valenso asked coldly.

A momentary anger flickered in the giant's eyes. "Even a Zingaran ought to know there's never been peace between Picts and Cimmerians, and never will be," he retorted with an oath. "Our feud with them is older than the world. If you'd said that to one of my wilder brothers, you'd have found yourself with a split head. But I've lived among you civilized men long enough to understand your ignorance and lack of common courtesy — the churlishness that demands his business of a man who appears at your door out of a thousand-mile wilderness. Never mind that." He turned to the two freebooters, who stood staring glumly at him. "From what I overheard," quoth he, "I gather there is some dissension over a map."

"That is none of your affair," growled Strombanni.

"Is this it?" Conan grinned wickedly and drew from his pocket a crumpled object — a square of parchment, marked with crimson

lines.

Strombanni started violently, paling. "My map!" he ejaculated. "Where did you get it?"

"From your mate, Galacus, when I killed him," answered Conan with grim enjoyment.

"You dog!" raved Strombanni, turning on Zarono. "You never had the map! You lied —"

"I never said I had it," snarled Zarono. "You deceived yourself. Be not a fool. Conan is alone; if he had a crew he'd already have cut our throats. We'll take the map from him —"

"You'll never touch it!" Conan laughed fiercely.

Both men sprang at him, cursing. Stepping back, he crumpled the parchment and cast it into the glowing coals of the fireplace. With an incoherent bellow, Strombanni lunged past him, to be met with a buffet under the ear that stretched him half-senseless on the floor. Zarono whipped out his sword, but before he could thrust, Conan's cutlass beat it out of his hand.

Zarono staggered against the table with all Hell in his eyes. Strombanni dragged himself erect with his eyes glazed and blood dripping from his bruised ear. Conan leaned slightly over the table, his outstretched cutlass just touching the breast of Count Valenso.

"Don't call for your soldiers, Count," said the Cimmerian softly. "Not a sound out of you — or from you, either, dog-face!" he said to Galbro, who showed no intention of braving his wrath. "The map's burned to ashes, and it'll do no good to spill blood. Sit down, all of you."

Strombanni hesitated, made an abortive gesture toward his hilt, then shrugged his shoulders and sank sullenly into a chair. The others followed suit. Conan remained standing, towering over the table, while his enemies watched him with eyes full of bitter hate.

"You were bargaining," he said. "That's all I've come to do."

"And what have you to trade?" sneered Zarono.

"Only the treasure of Tranicos."

"*What?*" All four men were on their feet, leaning toward him.

"*Sit down!*" roared Conan, banging his broad blade on the table.

They sank back, tense and white with excitement. Conan grinned in huge enjoyment of the sensation his words had caused and continued:

"Yes! I found the treasure before I got the map. That's why I burned the map. I need it not, and nobody shall ever find it unless I show him where it is."

They stared at him with murder in their eyes.

"You're lying," said Zaronno without conviction. "You've told us one lie already. You said you came from the woods, yet you say you haven't been living with the Picts. All men know this country is a wilderness, inhabited only by savages. The nearest outposts of civilization are the Aquilonian settlements on Thunder River, hundreds of miles to eastward."

"That's where I came from," replied Conan imperturbably. "I believe I'm the first white man to cross the Pictish Wilderness. When I fled from Aquilonia into Pictland, I blundered into a party of Picts and slew one, but a stone from a sling knocked me senseless during the melee and the dogs took me alive. They were Wolfmen, and they traded me to the Eagle clan in return for a chief of theirs the Eagles had captured. The Eagles carried me nearly a hundred miles westward, to burn me in their chief village; but I killed their war-chief and three or four others one night and broke away.



"I could not turn back, since they were behind me and kept herding me westward. A few days ago, I shook them off; and, by Crom, the place where I took refuge turned out to be the treasure trove of old Tranicos! I found it all: chests of garments and weapons — that's where I got these clothes and this blade — heaps of coins and gems and golden ornaments, and — in the midst of all — the jewels of Tothmekri gleaming like frozen starlight! And old Tranicos and his eleven captains sitting about an ebon table and staring at the hoard, as they've stared for a hundred years!"

"What?"

"Aye!" he laughed. "Tranicos died in the midst of his treasure, and all with him! Their bodies had not rotted or shriveled. They sit there in their high boots and skirted coats and lacquered hats, with their wineglasses in their stiff hands, just as they have sat for a century!"

"That's an unchancy thing!" muttered Strombanni uneasily, but Zarono snarled:

"What boots it? 'Tis the treasure we want. Go on, Conan."

Conan seated himself at the board, filled a goblet, and quaffed it before he answered.

"The first wine I've drunk since I left Aquilonia, by Crom! Those cursed Eagles hunted me so closely through the forest that I had hardly time to munch the nuts and roots I found. Sometimes I caught frogs and ate them raw because I dared not light a fire."

His impatient hearers informed him profanely that they were not interested in his dietary adventures prior to finding the treasure.

He grinned insolently and resumed: "Well, after I stumbled on to the trove, I lay up and rested a few days, and made snares to catch rabbits, and let my wounds heal. I saw smoke against the western sky but thought it some Pictish village on the beach. I lay close, but as it happens the loot's hidden in a place the Picts shun. If any spied on me, they didn't show themselves.

"Last night I started westward, intending to strike the beach some miles north of the spot where I'd seen the smoke. I wasn't far from the shore when that storm hit. I took shelter under a lee of rock and waited until it had blown itself out. Then I climbed a tree to look for Picts, and from it I saw Strom's carack at anchor and his men coming in to shore. I was making my way toward his camp on the beach when I met Galacus. I shoved a sword through him, because there was an old feud between us."

"What had he done to you?" asked Strombanni.

"Oh, stole a wench of mine years ago. I shouldn't have known he had a map, had he not tried to eat it ere he died.

"I recognized it for what it was, of course, and was considering what use I could make of it, when the rest of you dogs came up and found the body. I was lying in a thicket not a dozen yards from you while you were arguing with your men over the matter. I judged the time wasn't ripe for me to show myself!" He laughed at the rage and chagrin displayed in Strombanni's face. "Well, while I lay there listening to your talk, I got the drift of the situation and learned, from things you let fall, that Zaron and Valenso were a few miles south on the beach. So when I heard you say that Zaron must have done

the killing and taken the map, and that you meant to go and parley with him, seeking an opportunity to murder him and get it back —"

"Dog!" snarled Zaron.

Although livid, Strombanni laughed mirthlessly. "Do you think I'd play fair with a treacherous cur like you? Go on, Conan."

The Cimmerian grinned. It was evident that he was deliberately fanning the fires of hate between the two men.

"Nothing much, then. I came straight through the woods while you tacked along the coast and raised the fort before you did. Your guess that the storm had destroyed Zaron's ship was a good one — but then, you knew the configuration of this bay.

"Well, there's the story. I have the treasure, Strom has a ship, Valenso has supplies. By Crom, Zaron, I see not where you fit into the scheme, but to avoid strife I'll include you. My proposal is simple enough.

"We'll split the treasure four ways. Strom and I shall sail away with our shares aboard the *Red Hand*. You and Valenso take yours and remain lords of the wilderness, or build a ship out of tree trunks, as you wish."

Valenso branched and Zaron swore, while Strombanni grinned quietly.

"Are you fool enough to go aboard the *Red Hand* alone with Strombanni?" snarled Zaron. "He'll cut your throat before you're out of sight of land!"

Conan laughed with genuine enjoyment. "This is like the problem of the wolf, the sheep, and the cabbage," he admitted. "How to get them across the river without their devouring one another!"

"And that appeals to your Cimmerian sense of humor!" complained Zaron.

"I will not stay here!" cried Valenso, a wild gleam in his dark eyes. "Treasure or no treasure, I must go!"

Conan gave him a slit-eyed glance of speculation. "Well then," said he, "how about this plan: We divide the loot as I suggested.

Then Strombanni sails away with Zaron, Valenso, and such members of the count's household as he may select, leaving me in command of the fort, and the rest of Valenso's men, and all of Zaron's. I'll build my own ship."

Zaron looked sick. "I have the choice of remaining here in exile, or abandoning my crew and going alone on the *Red Hand* to have my throat cut?"

Conan's laughter rang gustily through the hall, and he smote Zaron jovially on the back, ignoring the black murder in the buccaneer's glare. "That's it, Zaron!" quoth he. "Stay here while Strom and I sail away, or sail away with Strombanni, leaving your men with me."

"I'd rather have Zaron," said Strombanni frankly. "You'd turn my own men against me, Conan, and cut my throat before I raised the Barachans."

Sweat dripped from Zaron's livid face. "Neither I, nor the count, nor his niece will ever reach the land alive if we ship with that devil," said he. "You are both in my power in this hall. My men surround it. What's to prevent my cutting you both down?"

"Not a thing," Conan admitted cheerfully, "except the fact that if you do, Strombanni's men will sail away and leave you stranded on this coast, where the Picts will presently cut all your throats; and the fact that with me dead you'd never find the treasure; and the fact that I'll split your skull down to your chin if you try to summon your men."

Conan laughed as he spoke, as if at some whimsical situation; but even Belesa sensed that he meant what he said. His naked cutlass lay across his knees, and Zaron's sword was under the table, out of the buccaneer's reach. Galbro was not a fighting man, and Valenso seemed incapable of decision or action.

"Aye!" said Strombanni with an oath. "You'd find the two of us no easy prey. I'm agreeable to Conan's proposal. What say you, Valenso?"

"I must leave this coast!" whispered Valenso, staring blankly. "I must hasten — I must go — go far — quickly!"

Strombanni frowned, puzzled at the count's strange manner, and turned to Zaron, grinning wickedly. "And you, Zaron?"

"What can I say?" snarled Zaron. "Let me take my three officers and forty men aboard the *Red Hand*, and the bargain's made."

"The officers and thirty men!"

"Very well."

"Done!"

There was no shaking of hands or ceremonial drinking of wine to seal the pact. The two captains glared at each other like hungry wolves. The count plucked his mustache with a trembling hand, rapt in his own somber thoughts. Conan stretched like a great cat, drank wine, and grinned on the assemblage, but it was the sinister grin of a stalking tiger.

Belesa sensed the murderous purposes that reigned there, the treacherous intent that dominated each man's mind. Not one had any intention of keeping his part of the pact, Valenso possibly excluded. Each of the freebooters intended to possess both the ship and the entire treasure. None would be satisfied with less.

But how? What was going on in each crafty mind? Belesa felt oppressed and stifled by the atmosphere of hatred and treachery. The Cimmerian, for all his ferocious frankness, was no less subtle than the others — and even fiercer. His domination of the situation was not physical alone, although his gigantic shoulders and massive limbs seemed too big for even the great hall. There was an iron vitality about the man that overshadowed even the hard vigor of the other freebooters.



"Lead us to the treasure!" Zarono demanded.

"Wait a bit," answered Conan. "We must keep our power evenly balanced, so that one cannot take advantage of the others. We'll work it thus: Strom's men shall come ashore, all but a half-dozen or so, and camp on the beach. Zarono's men shall come out of the fort and likewise camp on the strand, within easy sight of them. Then each crew can watch the other, to see that nobody slips after us who go for the treasure, to ambush either of us. Those left aboard the

Red Hand shall take her out into the bay, out of reach of either party. Valenso's men shall stay in the fort but leave the gate open. Will you come with us, Count?"

"Go into that forest?" Valenso shuddered and drew his cloak, about his shoulders. "Not for all the gold of Tranicos!"

"All right. 'Twill take about thirty men to carry the loot. We'll take fifteen from each crew and start as soon as we can."

Belesa, keenly alert to every angle of the drama being played out beneath her, saw Zaron and Strombanni shoot furtive glances at each other, then quickly lower their gaze as they lifted their glasses, to hide the murky intent in their eyes. She perceived the fatal weakness in Conan's plan and wondered how he could have overlooked it. Perhaps he was too arrogantly confident in his personal prowess. But she knew that he would never come out of that forest alive. Once the treasure was in their grasp, the others would form a rogue's alliance long enough to rid themselves of the man both hated. She shuddered, staring morbidly at the man she knew to be doomed. Strange to see that powerful fighting man sitting there, laughing and swilling wine, in full prime and power, and to know that he was already doomed to a bloody death.

The whole situation was pregnant with dark and bloody portents. Zaron would trick and kill Strombanni if he could, and she knew that Strombanni had already marked Zaron for death and, doubtless, her uncle and herself also. If Zaron won the final battle of cruel wits, their lives were safe — but, looking at the buccaneer as he sat there chewing his mustache, with all the stark evil of his nature showing naked in his dark face, she could not decide which was more abhorrent — death or Zaron.

"How far is it?" demanded Strombanni.

"If we start within the hour, we can be back before midnight," answered Conan. He emptied his goblet, rose, adjusted his girdle, and glanced at the count. "Valenso," he said, "are you mad, to kill a Pict not in his hunting paint?"

Valenso started. "What do you mean?"

"Do you mean to say you don't know that your men killed a Pict hunter in the woods last night?"

The count shook his head. "None of my men was in the woods last night."

"Well, somebody was," grunted the Cimmerian, fumbling in a pocket. "I saw his head nailed to a tree near the edge of the forest. He wasn't painted for war. I found no boot tracks, from which I judged that it had been nailed up there before the storm. But there were plenty of other signs — moccasin tracks on the wet ground. Picts have been there and seen that head. They were men of some other clan, or they'd have taken it down. If they happen to be at peace with the clan the dead man belonged to, they'll make tracks to his village to tell his tribe."

"Perhaps they slew him," suggested Valenso.

"No, they didn't. But they know who did, for the same reason that I know. This chain was knotted about the stump of the severed neck. You must have been utterly mad, to identify your handiwork like that."

He drew forth something and tossed it on the table before the count, who lurched up, choking, as his hand flew to his throat. It was the gold seal-chain that he had habitually worn about his neck.

"I recognized the Korzetta seal," said Conan. "The presence of that chain alone would tell any Pict it was the work of a foreigner."

Valenso did not reply. He sat staring at the chain as if at a venomous serpent.

Conan scowled at him and glanced questioningly at the others. Zarono made a quick gesture to indicate that the count was not quite right in the head. Conan sheathed his cutlass and donned his lacquered hat.

"All right; let's go," he said.

The captains gulped down their wine and rose, hitching at their sword belts. Zarono laid a hand on Valenso's arm and shook him slightly. The count started and stared about him, then followed the

others out like a man in a daze, the chain dangling from his fingers. But not all left the hall.

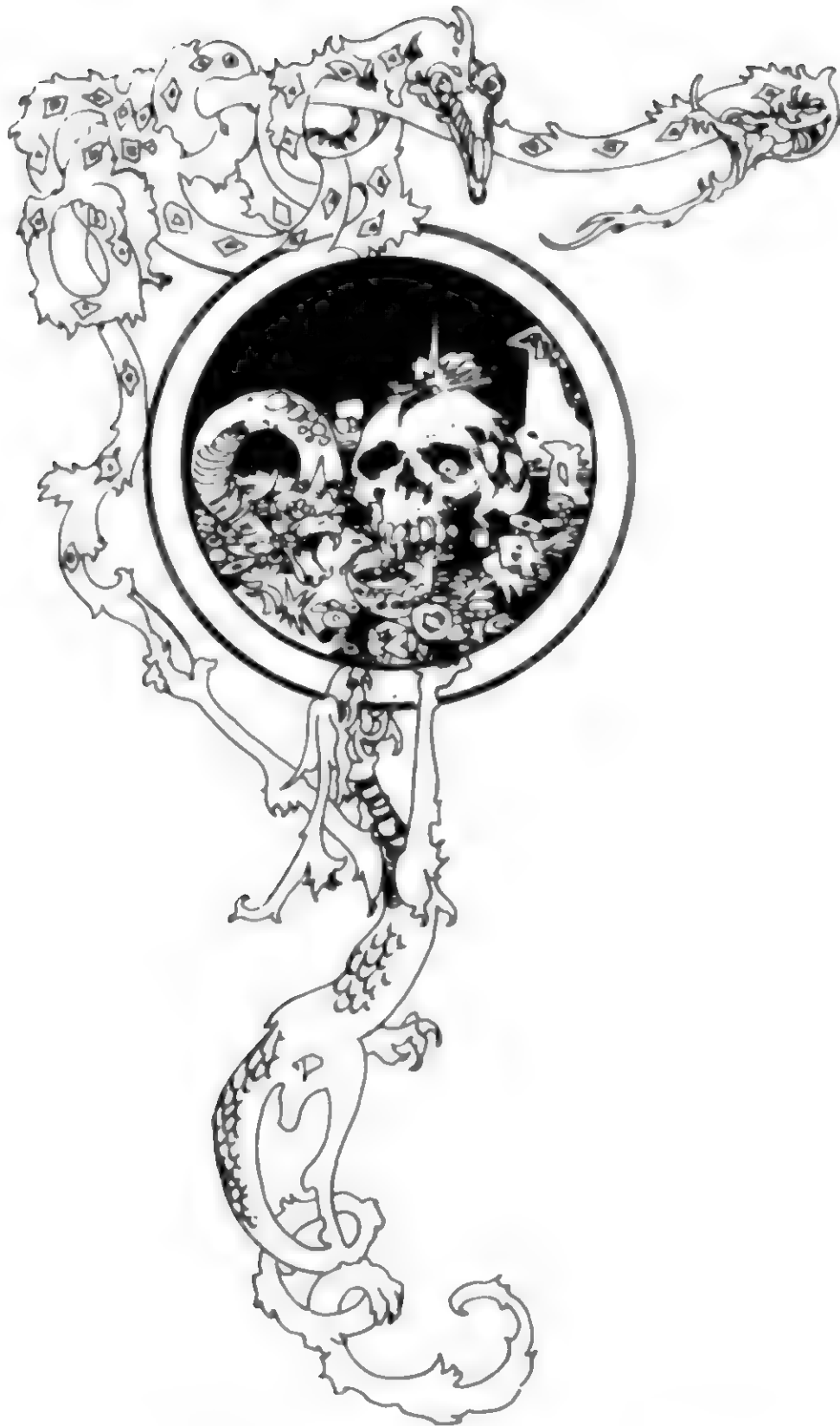
Forgotten on the stair, Belesa and Tina, peeping between the balusters, saw Galbro fall behind the others, loitering until the heavy door closed after them. Then he hurried to the fireplace and raked carefully at the smouldering coals. He sank to his knees and peered closely at something for a long space. Then he straightened and, with a furtive air, stole out of the hall by another door.

Tina whispered: "What did Galbro find in the fire?"

Belesa shook her head; then, obeying the promptings of her curiosity, rose and went down to the empty hall. An instant later, she was kneeling where the seneschal had knelt, and she saw what he had seen.

It was the charred remnant of the map that Conan had thrown into the fire. It was ready to crumble at a touch, but faint lines and bits of writing were still discernible upon it. She could not read the writing, but she could trace the outlines of what seemed to be the picture of a hill or crag, surrounded by marks evidently representing dense trees. She could make nothing of it; but, from Galbro's actions, she believed that he recognized it as portraying some scene or topographical feature familiar to him. She knew the seneschal had penetrated inland further than any other man of the settlement.





6. The Plunder of the Dead

The fortress stood strangely quiet in the noonday heat that had followed the storm of the dawn. Voices of people within the stockade sounded subdued, muffled. The same drowsy stillness reigned on the beach outside, where the rival crews lay in armed suspicion, separated by a few hundred yards of bare sand. Far out in the bay, the *Red Hand* lay at anchor with a handful of men aboard her, ready to snatch her out of reach at the slightest indication of treachery. The carack was Strombanni's trump card, his best guaranty against the trickery of his associates.

Belesa came down the stair and paused at the sight of Count Valenso seated at the table, turning the broken chain about in his hands. She looked at him without love and with more than a little fear. The change that had come over him was appalling; he seemed to be locked up in a grim world all his own, with a fear that flogged all human characteristics out of him.

Conan had plotted shrewdly to eliminate the chances of an ambush in the forest by either party. But, as far as Belesa could see, he had failed utterly to safeguard himself against the treachery of his companions. He had disappeared into the woods, leading the two captains and their thirty men, and the Zingaran girl was positive that she would never see him alive again.

Presently she spoke, and her voice was strained and harsh to her own ear: "The barbarian has led the captains into the forest. When they have the gold in their hands, they'll slay him. But when they return with the treasure, what then? Are we to go aboard the ship? Can we trust Strombanni?"

Valenso shook his head absently. "Strombanni would murder us all for our shares of the loot. But Zaroni secretly whispered his intentions to me. We will not go aboard the *Red Hand* save as her masters. Zaroni will see that night overtakes the treasure party, so they shall be forced to camp in the forest. He will find a way to kill Strombanni and his men in their sleep. Then the buccaneers will come on stealthily to the beach. Just before dawn, I will send some of my fishermen secretly from the fort, to swim out to the ship and seize her. Strombanni never thought of that, and neither did Conan.

Zarono and his men will come out of the forest and, together with the buccaneers encamped on the beach, fall upon the pirates in the dark, while I lead my men-at-arms from the fort to complete the rout. Without their captain, they will be demoralized and, outnumbered, fall easy prey to Zarono and me. Then we shall sail in Strombanni's ship with all the treasure."

"But what of me?" she asked with dry lips.

"I have promised you to Zarono," he answered harshly. "But for my promise, he would not take us off."

"I will never marry him," she said helplessly.

"You shall," he responded gloomily, without the slightest touch of sympathy. He lifted the chain so that it caught the gleam of the sun, slanting through a window. "I must have dropped it on the sand," he muttered. "He has been that near — on the beach ..."

"You did not drop it on the strand," said Belesa, in a voice as devoid of mercy as his own; her soul seemed turned to stone. "You tore it from your throat, by accident, last night in this hall, when you flogged Tina. I saw it gleaming on the floor before I left the hall."

He looked up, his face gray with a terrible fear; she laughed bitterly, sensing the mute question in his dilated eyes. "Yes! The black man! He was here! In this hall! He must have found the chain on the floor. The guardsmen did not see him, but he was at your door last night. I saw him, padding along the upper hallway."

For an instant she thought he would drop dead of sheer terror. He sank back in his chair, the chain slipping from his nerveless fingers and clinking on the table.

"In the manor!" he whispered. "I thought bolts and bars and armed guards could keep him out, fool that I was! I can no more guard against him than I can escape him! At my door! At my door!" The thought overwhelmed him with horror. "Why did he not enter?" he shrieked, tearing at the lace upon his collar as though it strangled him. "Why did he not end it? I have dreamed of waking in my darkened chamber to see him squatting above me, with the blue hell-fire playing about his head! Why —"

The paroxysm passed, leaving him faint and trembling.

"I understand!" he panted. "He is playing with me, as a cat with a mouse. To have slain me last night in my chamber were too easy, too merciful. So he destroyed the ship in which I might have escaped him, and he slew that wretched Bet and left my chain upon him, so that the savages might believe I had slain him. They have seen that chain upon my neck many a time.

"But why? What subtle deviltry has he in mind, what devious purpose no human mind can grasp or understand?"

"Who is this black man?" asked Belesa, a chill of fear crawling along her spine.

"A demon loosed by my greed and lust to plague me throughout eternity!" he whispered. He spread his long, thin fingers on the table before him and stared at her with hollow, weirdly luminous eyes, which seemed to see her not at all but to look through her and far beyond to some dim doom.

"In my youth, I had an enemy at court," he said, as if speaking more to himself than to her. "A powerful man who stood between me and my ambition. In my lust for wealth and power, I sought aid from the people of the black arts — a sorcerer who, at my desire, raised up a fiend from the outer gulfs of existence. It crushed and slew mine enemy; I grew great and wealthy, and none could stand before me. But I thought to cheat the wizard of the price a mortal must pay who calls the black folk to do his bidding.



"He was Thoth-Amon of the Ring, in exile from his native Stygia. He had fled in the reign of King Mentupherra, and when Mentupherra died and Ctesphon ascended the ivory throne of Luxur, Thoth-Amon lingered in Kordava though he might have returned home, dunning me for the debt I owed him. But, instead of paying him the moiety of

my gains as I had promised, I denounced him to my own monarch, so that Thoth-Amon must needs willy-nilly return to Stygia in haste and stealth. There he found favor and waxed in wealth and magical might until he was the virtual ruler of the land.

"Two years ago in Kordava, word came to me that Thoth-Amon had vanished from his accustomed haunts in Stygia. And then one night I saw his brown devil's face leering at me from the shadows in my castle hall.

"It was not his material body, but his spirit sent to plague me. This time I had no king to protect me, for upon the death of Ferdrugo and the setting up of the regency, the land, as you know, had fallen into factional strife. Before Thoth-Amon could reach Kordava in the flesh, I sailed to put broad seas between me and him. He has his limitations; to follow me across the seas he must remain in his human, fleshly body. But now this fiend has tracked me down by his uncanny powers even here in this vast wilderness.

"He is too crafty to be trapped or slain as one would do with a common man. When he hides, no man can find him. He steals like a shadow in the night, making naught of bolts and bars. He blinds the eyes of guardsmen with sleep. He can command the spirits of the air, the serpents of the deep, and the fiends of the night; he can raise storms to sink ships and throw down castles. I hoped to drown my trail in the blue, rolling waves — but he has tracked me down to claim his grim forfeit . . ."

The weird eyes lit palely as Valenso gazed beyond the tapestried walls to far, invisible horizons. "I'll trick him yet," he whispered. "Let him delay to strike this night, and dawn shall find me with a ship under my heels, and again I will cast an ocean between me and his vengeance."

* * *



"Hell's fire!"

Conan stopped short, glaring upward. Behind him, the seamen halted — two compact clumps of them, bows in their hands and suspicion in their attitude. They were following an old path made by Pictish hunters, which led due east. Although they had progressed only some thirty yards, the beach was no longer visible.

"What is it?" demanded Strombanni suspiciously. "Why are you stopping?"

"Are you blind? Look there!"

From the thick limb of a tree that overhung the trail, a head grinned down at them: a dark, painted face, framed in thick black hair, in which a hornbill feather drooped over the left ear.

"I took that head down and hid it in the bushes," growled Conan, scanning the woods about them narrowly. "What fool could have stuck it back up there? It looks as if somebody were trying his damndest to bring the Picts down on the settlement."

Men glanced at one another darkly, a new element of suspicion added to the already seething cauldron. Conan climbed the tree, secured the head, and carried it into the bushes, where he tossed it into a stream and watched it sink.

"The Picts whose tracks are about this tree weren't Hornbills," he growled, returning through the thicket. I've sailed these coasts enough to know something about the sea-land tribes. If I read the prints of their moccasins aright, they were Cormorants. I hope they're having a war with the Hornbills. If they're at peace, they'll head straight for the Hornbill village, and there'll be trouble. I don't know how far away that village is — but, as soon as they learn of this murder, they'll come through the forest like starving wolves. That's the worst insult possible to a Pict — to kill a man not in war-paint and stick his head up in a tree for the vultures to eat. Damned peculiar things going on along this coast. But that's always the way when civilized men come into the wilderness; they're all crazy as Hell. Come on."

Men loosened blades in their scabbards and shafts in their quivers as they strode deeper into the forest. Men of the sea, accustomed to rolling expanses of gray water, they were ill at ease with mysterious, green walls of trees and vines hemming them in. The path wound and twisted until most of them quickly lost their sense of direction and did not even know in which direction the beach lay.

Conan was uneasy for another reason. He kept scanning the trail and finally grunted: "Somebody's passed along here recently — not more than an hour ahead of us. Somebody in boots, with no woodcraft. Was he the fool who found that Pict's head and stuck it back up in that tree? No, it couldn't have been he. I didn't find his tracks under the tree. But who was it? I found no tracks there, except those of the Picts I'd already seen. And who's this fellow hurrying ahead of us? Did either of you bastards send a man ahead of us for any reason?"

Both Strombanni and Zaroni loudly disclaimed any such act, glaring at each other with mutual disbelief. Neither man could see the signs Conan pointed out; the faint prints that he saw on the grassless, hard-beaten trail were invisible to their untrained eyes.

Conan quickened his pace, and they hurried after him, fresh coals of suspicion added to the smoldering fire of distrust. Presently

the path veered northward, and Conan left it and began threading his way through the trees in a southeasterly direction. The afternoon wore on as the sweating men plowed through bushes and climbed over logs. Strombanni, momentarily falling behind with Zarono, murmured:

"Think you he's leading us into an ambush?"

"He might," retorted the buccaneer. "In any case, we shall never find our way back to the sea without him to guide us." Zarono gave Strombanni a meaningful look.

"I see your point," said the latter. "This may force a change in our plans."

Suspicion grew as they advanced and had almost reached panic proportions when they emerged from the thick woods and saw, just ahead of them, a gaunt crag that jutted up from the forest floor. A dim path, leading out of the woods from the east, ran along a cluster of boulders and wound up the crag on a ladder of stony shelves to a flat ledge near the summit.



Conan halted, a bizarre figure in his piratical finery. "That trail is the one I followed, when I was running from the Eagle Picts," he

said. "It leads up to a cave behind that ledge. In that cave are the bodies of Tranicos and his captains, and the treasure he plundered from Tothmekri. But a word before we go up after it. If you kill me here, you'll never find your way back to the trail we followed from the beach. I know you seafaring men; you're helpless in the deep woods. Of course, the beach lies due west; but, if you have to make your way through the tangled woods, burdened with the plunder, it'll take you, not hours, but days. And I don't think these woods will be very safe for white men, when the Hornbills learn about their hunter."

He laughed at the ghastly, mirthless smiles with which they greeted his recognition of their intentions toward him. And he also comprehended the thought that sprang in the mind of each: Let the barbarian secure the loot for them and lead them back to the beach trail before they killed him.

"All of you stay here except Strombanni and Zarono," said Conan. "We three are enough to pack the treasure down from the cave."

Strombanni grinned mirthlessly. "Go up there alone with you and Zarono? Do you take me for a fool? One man at least comes with me!"

And he designated his boatswain, a brawny, hard-faced giant, naked to his broad leather belt, with gold hoops in his ears and a crimson scarf around his head.

"And my executioner comes with me!" growled Zarono. He beckoned to a lean sea-thief with a face like a parchment-covered skull, who carried a two-handed scimitar naked over his bony shoulder.

Conan shrugged his shoulders. "Very well. Follow me."

They were close on his heels as he strode up the winding path and mounted the ledge. They crowded him close as he passed through the cleft in the wall behind it, and their breath sucked greedily between their teeth as he called their attention to the iron-bound chests on either side of the short, tunnel-like cavern.

"A rich cargo here," he said carelessly. "Silks, laces, garments, ornaments, weapons — the loot of the southern seas. But the real treasure lies beyond that door."

The massive door stood partly open. Conan frowned. He remembered closing that door before he left the cavern. But he said nothing of the matter to his eager companions as he drew aside to let them through.

They looked into a wide cavern, lit by a strange, blue glow that glimmered through a smoky, mistlike haze. A great ebon table stood in the midst of the cavern, and, in a carved chair with a high back and broad arms, which might once have stood in the castle of some Zingaran baron, sat a giant figure, fabulous and fantastic. There sat Bloody Trnicos, his great head sunk on his bosom, one hand still gripping a jeweled goblet — Trnicos, in his lacquered hat, his gilt-embroidered coat with jeweled buttons that winked in the blue flame, his flaring boots and gold-worked baldric, which upheld a jewel-hilted sword in a golden sheath.



And ranging the board, each with his chin resting on his lace-bedecked breast, sat the eleven captains. The blue fire played weirdly

on them and on their giant admiral, as it flowed from the enormous jewel on the tiny ivory pedestal, striking glints of frozen fire from the heaps of fantastically-cut gems that shone before the place of Tranicos — the plunder of Khemi, the jewels of Tothmekri! The stones whose value was greater than that of all the rest of the known jewels in the world put together!

The faces of Zaron and Strombanni showed pallid in the blue glow. Over their shoulders, their men gaped stupidly.

"Go in and take them," invited Conan, drawing aside.

Zaron and Strombanni crowded avidly past him, jostling each other in their haste. Their followers were treading on their heels. Zaron kicked the door wide open — and halted, with one foot on the threshold, at the sight of a figure on the floor, previously hidden from view by the partly-closed door. It was a man, prone and contorted, with his head drawn back between his shoulders and his white face twisted in a grin of mortal agony.



"Galbro!" exclaimed Zaron. "Dead! What—" With sudden suspicion, he thrust his head over the threshold. Then he jerked back and screamed: "There's death in the cavern!"

Even as he screamed, the blue mist swirled and condensed. At the same time, Conan hurled his weight against the four men bunched in the doorway, sending them staggering — but not

headlong into the misty cavern as he had planned. Suspecting a trap, they were recoiling from the sight of the dead man and the materializing demon. Hence his violent push, while it threw them off their feet, yet failed of the result he desired. Strombanni and Zarono sprawled half over the threshold on their knees, the boatswain tumbled over their legs, and the executioner caromed against the wall.

Before Conan could follow up his ruthless intention of kicking the fallen men into the cavern and holding the door against them until the supernatural horror within had done its deadly work, he had to turn and defend himself against the frothing onslaught of the executioner, who was the first to regain his balance and his wits.

The buccaneer missed a tremendous swipe with his headsman's sword as the Cimmerian ducked, and the great blade banged against the stone wall, spattering blue sparks. The next instant, the executioner's skullfaced head rolled on the cavern floor under the bite of Conan's cutlass.

In the split seconds this swift action consumed, the boatswain regained his feet and fell on the Cimmerian, raining blows with a cutlass that would have overwhelmed a lesser man. Cutlass met cutlass with a ring of steel that was deafening in the narrow cavern.

Meanwhile the two captains, terrified of they knew not what in the cavern, scuttled back out of the doorway so quickly that the demon had not fully materialized before they were over the magical boundary and out of its reach. By the time they rose to their feet, reaching for their swords, the monster had diffused again into blue mist.

Hotly engaged with the boatswain, Conan redoubled his efforts to dispose of his antagonist before help could come to him. The boatswain dripped blood at each step as he was driven back before the ferocious onslaught, bellowing for his companions. Before Conan could deal the finishing stroke, the two chiefs came at him with swords in their hands, shouting for their men.

The Cimmerian bounded back and leaped out on to the ledge. Although he felt himself a match for all three men — each a famed

swordsman — he did not wish to be trapped by the crews, which would come charging up the path at the sound of the battle.

These were not coming with as much celerity as he expected, however. They were bewildered by the sounds and the muffled shouts issuing from the cavern above them, but no man dared start up the path for fear of a sword in the back. Each band faced the other tensely, grasping their weapons but incapable of decision. When they saw the Cimmerian bound out on the ledge, they still hesitated. While they stood with their arrows nocked, he ran up the ladder of handholds niched in the crag near the cleft and threw himself prone on the summit of the crag, out of their sight.

The captains stormed out on the ledge, raving and brandishing their swords. Their men, seeing that their leaders were not at sword-strokes, ceased menacing each other and gaped in bewilderment.

"Dog!" screamed Zaron. "You planned to trap and murder us! Traitor!"

Conan mocked them from above. "Well, what did you expect? You two were planning to cut my throat as soon as I got the plunder for you. If it hadn't been for that fool Galbro, I should have trapped the four of you and explained to your men how you rushed in heedless to your doom."

"And with us both dead, you'd have taken my ship and all the loot, too!" frothed Strombanni.

"Aye! And the pick of each crew! I've been thinking of coming back to the Main for months, and this was a good opportunity!"

"It was Galbro's footprints I saw on the trail, although I know not how the fool learned of this cave, or how he expected to lug the loot away by himself."

"But for the sight of his body, we should have walked into that death-trap," muttered Zaron, his swarthy face still ashy.

"What was it?" said Strombanni. "Some poisonous mist?"

"Nay, it writhed like a live thing and came together in some fiendish form ere we backed out. It is some devil bound to the cave by a spell."

"Well, what are you going to do?" their unseen tormentor yelled sardonically.

"What *shall* we do?" Zaron asked Strombanni. "The treasure cavern cannot be entered."

"You can't get the treasure," Conan assured them from his eyrie. "The demon will strangle you. It nearly got me, when I stepped in there. Listen, and I'll tell you a tale the Picts tell in their huts when the fires burn low!

"Once, long ago, twelve strange men came out of the sea. They fell upon a Pictish village and put all the folk to the sword, except a few who fled in time. Then they found a cave and heaped it with gold and jewels. But a shaman of the slaughtered Picts — one of those, who escaped — made magic and evoked a demon from one of the lower hells. By his sorcerous powers, he forced this demon to enter the cavern and strangle the men as they sat at wine. And, lest this demon thereafter roam abroad and molest the Picts themselves, the shaman confined it by his magic to the inner cavern. The tale was told from tribe to tribe, and all the clans shun the accursed spot.



"When I crawled in there to escape the Eagle Picts, I realized that the old legend was true and referred to Tranicos and his men.

Death guards old Trancos's treasure!"

"Bring up the men!" frothed Strombanni. "We'll climb up and hew him down!"

"Don't be a fool!" snarled Zaron. "Think you any man on earth could climb those hand-holds in the teeth of his sword? We'll have the men up here, right enough, to feather him with shafts if he dares show himself. But we'll get those gems yet. He has some plan of obtaining the loot, or he'd not have brought thirty men to bear it back. If he could get it, so can we. We'll bend a cutlass blade to make a hook, tie it to a rope, and cast it about the leg of that table, then drag it to the door."

"Well thought, Zaron!" came down Conan's mocking voice. "Exactly what I had in mind. But how will you find your way back to the beach path? It'll be dark long before you reach the beach, if you have to feel your way through the woods, and I'll follow you and kill you one by one in the dark."

"It's no empty boast," muttered Strombanni. "He can move and strike in the dark as subtly and silently as a ghost, if he hunts us back through the forest, few of us will live to see the beach."

"Then we'll kill him here," gritted Zaron. "Some of us will shoot at him, while the rest climb the crag. If he is not struck by arrows, some of us will reach him with our swords. Listen! Why does he laugh?"

"To hear dead men making plots," came Conan's grimly amused voice.

"Heed him not," scowled Zaron. Lifting his voice, he shouted for the men below to join him and Strombanni on the ledge.

The sailors started up the slanting trail, and one started to shout a question. Simultaneously there sounded a hum like that of an angry bee, ending with a sharp thud. The buccaneer gasped, and blood gushed from his open mouth. He sank to his knees, a black shaft protruding from his back. A yell of alarm went up from his companions.

"What's the matter?" shouted Strombanni.

"Picts!" bawled a pirate, lifting his bow and loosing blindly. At his side, a man moaned and went down with an arrow through his throat.

"Take cover, you fools!" shrieked Zaron. From his vantage point, he glimpsed painted figures moving in the bushes. One of the men on the winding path fell back dying. The rest scrambled hastily down among the rocks about the foot of the crag. They took cover clumsily, not being used to fighting of this kind. Arrows flickered from the bushes, splintering on the boulders. The men on the ledge lay prone.

"We're trapped!" said Strombanni, his face pale. Bold enough with a deck under his feet, this silent, savage warfare shook his ruthless nerves.

"Conan said they feared this crag," said Zaron. "When night falls, the men must climb up here. We'll hold this crag; the Picts won't rush us."

"Aye!" mocked Conan above them. "They won't climb the crag to get at you, that's true. They'll merely surround it and keep you here until you all die of thirst and starvation."

"He speaks truth," said Zaron helplessly. "What shall we do?"

"Make a truce with him," muttered Strombanni. "If any man can get us out of this jam, he can. Time enough to cut his throat later." Lifting his voice, he called: "Conan, let's forget our feud for the time being. You're in this fix as much as we are. Come down and help us out of it."

"How do you figure that?" retorted the Cimmerian. "I have but to wait until dark, climb down the other side of this crag, and melt into the forest. I can crawl through the line the Picts have thrown around this hill, return to the fort, and report you all slain by the savages — which will shortly be the truth!"

Zaron and Strombanni stared at each other in pallid silence.

"But I'll not do that!" Conan roared. "Not because I have any love for you dogs, but because I don't leave white men, even my enemies, to be butchered by Picts."

The Cimmerian's touseled black head appeared over the crest of the crag. "Now listen closely: That's only a small band down there. I saw them sneaking through the brush when I laughed, a while ago. Anyway, if there had been many of them, every man at the foot of the crag would be dead already. I think that's a band of fleet-footed young bucks sent ahead of the main war party to cut us off from the beach. I'm certain a big war band is heading in our direction from somewhere.

"They're thrown a cordon around the west side of the crag, but I don't think there are any on the east side. I'm going down on that side, to get into the forest and work around behind them. Meanwhile, you crawl down the path and join your men among the rocks. Tell them to unstring their bows and draw their swords. When you hear me yell, rush the trees on the west side of the clearing."

"What of the treasure?"

"To Hell with the treasure! We shall be lucky if we get out of here with our heads on our shoulders."

The black-maned head vanished. They listened for sounds to indicate that Conan had crawled to the almost sheer eastern wall and was working his way down, but they heard nothing. Nor was there any sound in the east. No more arrows broke against the rocks where the sailors were hidden. But all knew that fierce, black eyes were watching with murderous patience.

Gingerly, Strombanni, Zaron, and the boatswain started down the winding path. They were halfway down when black shafts began to whisper around them. The boatswain groaned and toppled limply down the slope, shot through the heart. Arrows shivered on the helmets and breastplates of the chiefs as they tumbled in frantic haste down the steep trail. They reached the foot in a scrambling rush and lay panting among the boulders, swearing breathlessly.

"Is this more of Conan's trickery?" wondered Zaron profanely.

"We can trust him in this matter," asserted Strombanni. "These barbarians live by their own particular code of honor, and Conan would never desert men of his own complexion to be slaughtered by

people of another race. He'll help us against the Picts, even though he plans to murder us himself — *hark!*"

A blood-freezing yell knifed the silence. It came from the woods to the west, and simultaneously an object arched out of the trees, struck the ground, and rolled bouncingly toward the rocks — a severed human head, the hideously painted face frozen in a snarl of death.

"Conan's signal!" roared Strombanni, and the desperate freebooters rose like a wave from the rocks and rushed headlong toward the woods.

Arrows whirled out of the bushes, but their flight was hurried and erratic; only three men fell. Then the wild men of the sea plunged through the fringe of foliage and fell on the naked painted figures that rose out of the gloom before them. There was a murderous instant of panting, ferocious, hand-to-hand effort. Cutlasses beat down war-axes, booted feet trampled naked bodies, and then bare feet were rattling through the bushes in headlong flight as the survivors of that brief carnage quit the fray, leaving seven still, painted figures stretched on the bloodstained leaves that littered the earth. Farther back in the thickets sounded a thrashing and heaving; then it ceased, and Conan strode into view, his lacquered hat gone, his coat torn, his cutlass dripping in his hand.

"What now?" panted Zaron. He knew the charge had succeeded only because Conan's unexpected attack on the rear of the Picts had demoralized the painted men and prevented them from falling back before the rush. But he exploded into curses as Conan passed his cutlass through a buccaneer who writhed on the ground with a shattered hip.

"We cannot carry him with us," grunted Conan. "It wouldn't be any kindness to leave him to be taken alive by the Picts. Come on!"

They crowded close at his heels as he trotted through the trees. Alone, they would have sweated and blundered among the thickets for hours before they found the beach trail — if they had ever found it. The Cimmerian led them as unerringly as if he had been following

a blazed path, and the rovers shouted with hysterical relief as they burst suddenly upon the trail that ran westward.

"Fool!" Conan clapped a hand on the shoulder of a pirate who started to break into a run and hurled him back among his companions. "You'll burst your heart and fall within a thousand yards. We're miles from the beach. Take an easy gait. We may have to sprint the last mile; save some of your wind for it. Come on, now!"

He set off down the trail at a steady jog-trot. The seamen followed him, suiting their pace to his.

The sun was touching the waves of the western ocean. Tina stood at the window from which Belesa had watched the storm.

"The setting sun turns the ocean to blood," she said. "The carack's sail is a white fleck on the crimson waters. The woods are already darkened with clustering shadows."

"What of the seamen on the beach?" asked Belesa languidly. She reclined on a couch, her eyes closed, her hands clasped behind her head.

"Both camps are preparing their supper," said Tina. "They gather driftwood and build fires. I can hear them shouting to one another — *what is that?*"

The sudden tenseness in the girl's tone brought Belesa upright on the couch. Tina grasped the windowsill, her face white.

"Listen! A howling, far off, like many wolves!"

"Wolves?" Belesa sprang up, fear clutching her heart. "Wolves do not hunt in packs at this time of year —"

"Oh, look!" shrilled the girl, pointing. "Men are running out of the forest!"

In an instant, Belesa was beside her, staring wide-eyed at the figures small in the distance, streaming out of the woods.

"The sailors!" she gasped. "Empty-handed! I see Zaron — Strombanni —"

"Where is Conan?" whispered the child. Belesa shook her head.

"Listen! Oh, listen!" whimpered Tina, clinging to her.

"The Picts!"

All in the fort could hear it now — a vast ululation of mad exultation and blood lust, from the depths of the dark forest. The sound spurred on the panting men, reeling toward the palisade.

"Hasten!" gasped Strombanni, his face a drawn mask of exhausted effort. "They are almost at our heels. My ship —"

"She is too far for us to reach," panted Zarono. "Make for the stockade. See, the men camped on the beach have seen us!"

He waved his arms in breathless pantomime, but the men on the strand understood and recognized the significance of that wild howling, rising to a triumphant crescendo. The sailors abandoned their fires and cooking pots and fled for the stockade gate. They were pouring through it as the fugitives from the forest rounded the south angle and reeled into the gate, a heaving, frantic mob, half dead from exhaustion. The gate was slammed with frenzied haste, and sailors began to climb to the footwalk to join the men-at-arms already there.

Belesa, who had hurried down from the manor, confronted Zarono. "Where is Conan?"

The buccaneer jerked a thumb toward the blackening woods. His chest heaved; sweat poured down his face. "Their scouts were at our heels ere we gained the beach. He paused to slay a few and give us time to get away."

He staggered away to take his place on the footwalk, whither Strombanni had already mounted. Valenso stood there, a somber, cloak-wrapped figure, strangely silent and aloof. He was like a man bewitched.

"Look!" yelled a pirate, above the deafening howling of the yet unseen horde. A man emerged from the forest and raced fleetly across the open belt.

"Conan!" Zarono grinned wolfishly. "We're safe in the stockade; we know where the treasure is. No reason why we shouldn't feather him with arrows now."

"Nay!" Strombanni caught his arm. "We shall need his sword. Look!"



Behind the fleet-footed Cimmerian, a wild horde burst from the forest, howling as they ran — naked Picts, hundreds and hundreds of them. Their arrows rained about the Cimmerian. A few strides more, and Conan reached the eastern wall of the stockade, bounded high, seized the points of the logs, and heaved himself up and over, his cutlass in his teeth. Arrows thudded venomously into the logs where his body had just been. His resplendent coat was gone, his white shirt torn and blood-stained.



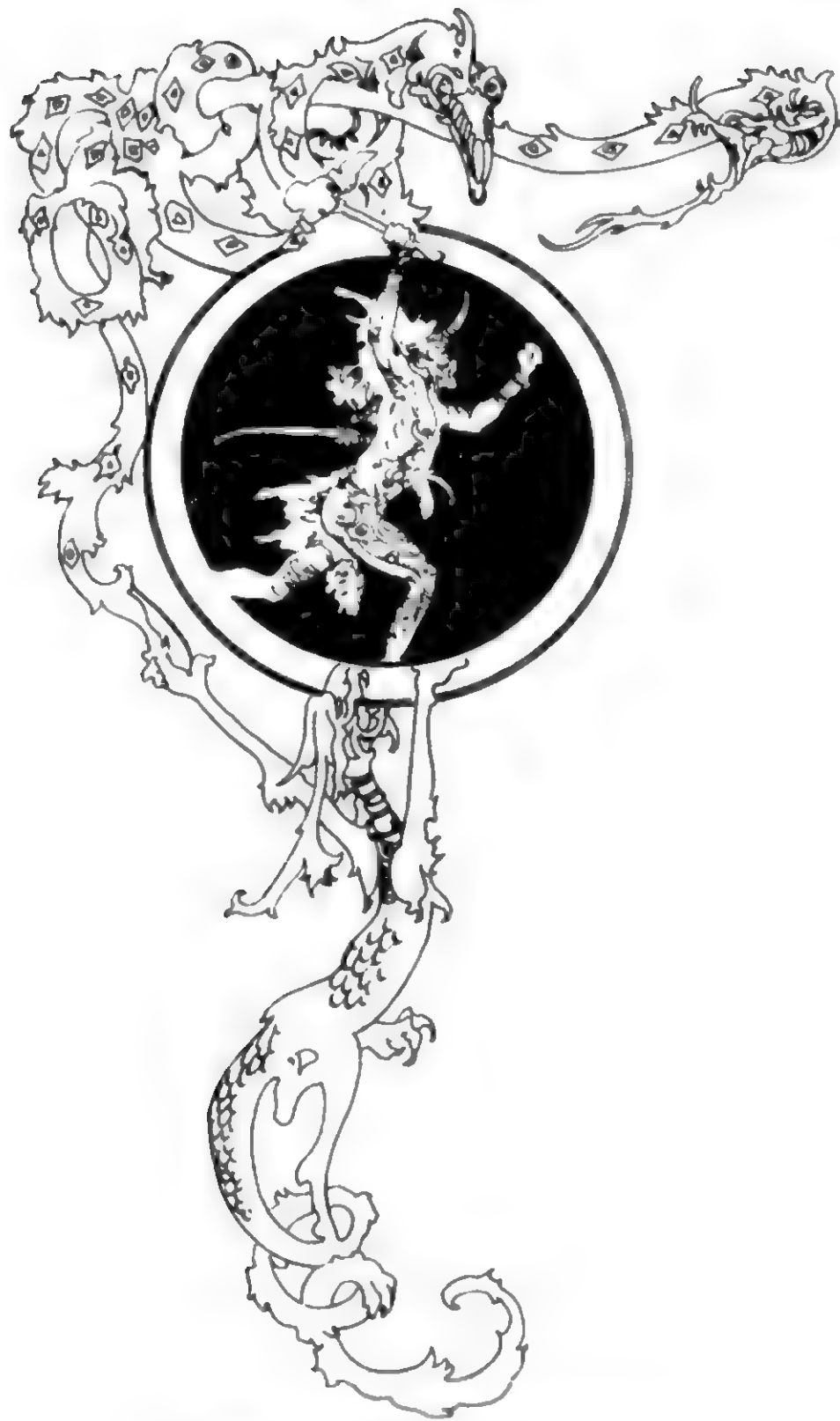
"Stop them!" he roared as his feet hit the ledge inside. "If they get on the wall, we're done for!"

Pirates, buccaneers, and men-at-arms responded instantly, and a storm of arrows and quarrels tore into the oncoming horde. Conan saw Belesa with Tina clinging to her hand, and his language was picturesque.

"Get into the manor," he commanded in conclusion. "Their shafts will arch over the wall — what did I tell you?" A black shaft cut into the earth at Belesa's feet and quivered like a serpent's head. Conan caught up a longbow and leaped to the footwalk. "Some of you fellows prepare torches!" he roared, above the clamor of battle. "We can't find them in the dark!"



The sun had sunk in a welter of blood. Out in the bay, the men aboard the carack had cut the anchor chain, and the *Red Hand* was rapidly receding on the crimson horizon.



7. Men of the Woods

Night had fallen, but torches streamed across the strand, casting the mad scene into lurid revealment. Naked men in paint swarmed the beach; like waves they came against the palisade, bared teeth and blazing eyes gleaming in the glare of the torches thrust over the wall. Hornbill feathers waved in black manes, and the feathers of the cormorant and the sea-falcon. A few warriors, the wildest and most barbaric of them all, wore sharks' teeth woven in their tangled locks. The sea-land tribes had gathered from up and down the coast in all directions to rid their country of the white-skinned invaders.

They surged against the palisade, driving a storm of arrows before them, fighting into the teeth of the shafts and bolts that tore into their masses from the stockade. Sometimes they came so close to the wall that they were hewing at the gate with their war-axes and thrusting their spears through the loopholes. But each time the tide ebbed back without flowing over the palisade, leaving its drift of dead. At this kind of fighting, the freebooters of the sea were at their stoutest. Their arrows and bolts tore holes in the charging horde; their cutlasses hewed the wild men from the palisades they strove to scale.

Yet again and again, the men of the woods returned to the onslaught with all the stubborn ferocity that had been roused in their fierce hearts.

"They are like mad dogs!" gasped Zarono, hacking downward at the dark hands that grasped the palisade points and the dark faces that snarled up at him.

"If we can hold the fort until dawn, they'll lose heart," grunted Conan, splitting a feathered skull with professional precision. "They won't maintain a long siege. Look, they're falling back."

The charge rolled back. The men on the wall shook the sweat out of their eyes, counted their dead, and took a fresh grip on the blood-slippery hilts of their swords. Like blood-hungry wolves, grudgingly driven from a cornered prey, the Picts skulked back beyond the ring of torches. Only the bodies of the slain lay before the palisade.

"Have they gone?" Strombanni shook back his wet, tawny locks. The cutlass in his fist was notched and red; his brawny arm was splashed with blood.

"They're still out there." Conan nodded toward the outer darkness that ringed the circle of torches, made more intense by their light. He glimpsed movements in the shadows, the glitter of eyes and the red glint of copper weapons.

"They're drawn off for a bit, though," he said. "Put sentries on the wall and let the rest eat and drink. 'Tis past midnight, and we've been fighting for hours without respite. Ha, Valenso, how goes the battle with you?"

The count, in dented, blood-splashed helmet and cuirass, moved somberly up to where Conan and the captains stood. For answer, he muttered something inaudible under his breath. And then out of the darkness a voice spoke: a loud, clear voice that rang through the entire fort.

"Count Valenso! Count Valenso of Korzetta! Do you hear me?" It spoke with a Stygian accent.

Conan heard the count gasp as if he had been stricken with a mortal wound. Valenso reeled and grasped the tops of the logs of the stockade, his face pale in the torchlight. The voice resumed:

"It is I, Thoth-Amon of the Ring! Did you think to flee me once more? It is too late for that! All your schemes shall avail you naught, for tonight I shall send a messenger to you. It is the demon that guarded the treasure of Tranicos, whom I have released from his cave and bound to my service. He will inflict upon you the doom that you, you dog, have earned: a death at once slow, hard, and disgraceful. Let us see you mulct your way out of that!"

The speech ended in a peal of musical laughter. Valenso gave a scream of terror, jumped down from the footwalk, and ran staggering up the slope toward the manor.

When the lull came in the fighting, Tina had crept to their window, from which they had been driven by the danger of flying

arrows. Silently she watched the men gather about the fire. Belesa was reading a letter that had been delivered by a serving-woman to her door. It read:

Count Valenso of Korzetta to his niece Belesa, greeting:

My doom has come upon me at last. Now that I am resigned if not reconciled to it, I would have you know that I am not insensible of the fact that I have used you in a manner not consistent with the honor of the Korzettas. I did so because circumstances left me no other choice. Although it is late for apologies, I ask that you think not too hardly of me; and, if you can bring yourself to do so, and by some chance you survive this night of doom, that you pray to Mitra for the soiled soul of your father's brother. Meanwhile, I advise that you remain away from the great hall, lest the same fate that awaits me encompass you also. Farewell.

Belesa's hands shook as she read. Although she could never love her uncle, this was still the most human action she had ever known him to take.

At the window, Tina said: "There ought to be more men on the walls. Suppose the black man came back?"

Belesa, going over beside her to look out, shuddered at the thought.

"I am afraid," murmured Tina. "I hope Strombanni and Zarono are killed."

"And not Conan?" asked Belesa curiously.

"Conan would not harm us," said the child confidently. "He lives up to his barbaric code of honor, but they are men who have lost all honor."

"You are wise beyond your years, Tina," said Belesa, with the vague uneasiness that the precocity of the child often aroused in her.

"Look!" Tina stiffened. "The sentry is gone from the south wall! I saw him on the ledge a moment ago; now he has vanished."

From their window, the palisade points of the south wall were just visible over the slanting roofs of a row of huts which paralleled that wall for almost its entire length. A sort of open-topped corridor, three or four yards wide, was formed by the stockade and the back of the huts, which were built in a solid row. These huts were occupied by the serfs.

"Where could the sentry have gone?" whispered Tina uneasily.

Belesa was watching one end of the hut row, which was not far from a side door of the manor. She could have sworn she saw a shadowy figure glide from behind the huts and disappear at the door. Was that the vanished sentry? Why had he left the wall, and why should he steal so subtly into the manor? She did not believe it was the sentry she had seen, and a nameless fear congealed her blood.

"Where is the count, Tina?" she asked.

"In the great hall, my lady. He sits alone at the table, wrapped in his cloak and drinking wine, with a face as gray as death."

"Go and tell him what we have seen. I will keep watch from this window, lest the Picts steal over the unguarded wall."

Tina scampered away. Suddenly remembering the warning in the count's letter about staying out of the main hall, Belesa rose, hearing Tina's slippered feet pattering along the corridor, receding down the stair.

Then abruptly, terribly, there rang out a scream of such poignant fear that Belesa's heart almost stopped with the shock of it. She was out of the chamber and flying down the corridor before she was aware that her limbs were in motion. She ran down the stairs — and halted as if turned to stone.

She did not scream as Tina had screamed. She was incapable of sound or motion. She saw Tina, was aware of the reality of small hands frantically grasping her. But these were the only sane realities in a scene of black nightmare and lunacy and death, dominated by

the monstrous, anthropomorphic shadow that spread awful arms against a lurid, hell-fire glare.

Out in the stockade, Strombanni shook his head at Conan's question. "I heard nothing."

"I did!" Conan's wild instincts were roused; he was tensed, his eyes blazing. "It came from the south wall, behind those huts!"

Drawing his cutlass, he strode toward the palisade. From the compound, the wall on the south and the sentry posted there were not visible, being hidden behind the huts. Strombanni followed, impressed by the Cimmerian's manner.

At the mouth of the open space between the huts and the wall, Conan halted warily. The space was dimly lighted by torches flaring at either corner of the stockade. And, about midway of that corridor, a crumpled shape sprawled on the ground.

"Bracus!" swore Strombanni, running forward and dropping on one knee beside the figure. "By Mitra, his throat's been cut from ear to ear!"

Conan swept the space with a quick glance, finding it empty save for himself, Strombanni, and the dead man. He peered through a loophole. No living man moved within the ring of torchlight outside the fort.

"Who could have done this?" he wondered.

"Zarono!" Strombanni sprang up, spitting fury like a wildcat, his hair bristling, his face convulsed. "He has set his thieves to stabbing my men in the back! He plans to wipe me out by treachery! Devils! I am leagued within and without!"

"Wait!" Conan reached a restraining hand. "I don't believe Zarono —"

But the maddened pirate jerked away and rushed around the end of the hut row, breathing blasphemies. Conan ran after him, swearing. Strombanni made straight toward the fire by which Zarono's tall, lean form was visible as the buccaneer chief quaffed a jack of ale.

His amazement was supreme when the jack was dashed violently from his hand, spattering his breastplate with foam, and he was jerked around to confront the passion-distorted face of the pirate captain.

"You murdering dog!" roared Strombanni. "Will you slay my men behind my back while they fight for your filthy hide as well as for mine?"

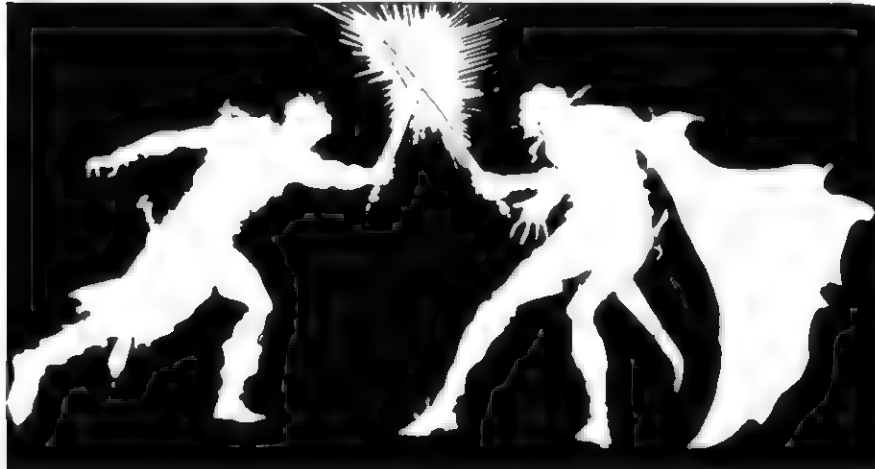
Conan was hurrying toward them, and on all sides men ceased eating and drinking to stare in amazement.

"What do you mean?" sputtered Zaron.

"You've set your men to stabbing mine at their posts!" screamed the maddened Barachan.

"You lie!" Smoldering hate burst into sudden flame.

With an incoherent howl, Strombanni heaved up his cutlass and cut at the buccaneer's head. Zaron caught the blow on his armored left arm, and sparks flew as he staggered back, ripping out his own sword.



In an instant, the captains were fighting like madmen, their blades flaming and flashing in the firelight. Their crews reacted instantly and blindly. A deep roar went up as pirates and buccaneers drew their swords and fell upon one another. The men left on the walls abandoned their posts and leaped down into the stockade, blades in hand. In an instant the compound was a battleground, where knotting, writhing groups of men smote and slew in a blind

frenzy. Some of the men-at-arms and serfs were drawn into the melee, and the soldiers at the gate turned and stared down in amazement, forgetting the enemy that lurked outside.

It all happened so quickly — smoldering passions exploding into sudden battle — that men were fighting all over the compound before Conan could reach the maddened chiefs. Ignoring their swords, he tore them apart with such violence that they staggered backward, and

Zarono tripped and fell flat.

"You cursed fools, will you throw away all our lives?"

Strombanni was frothing mad and Zarono was bawling for assistance. A buccaneer ran at Conan from behind and cut at his head. The Cimmerian half turned and caught his arm, checking the stroke in midair.

"Look, you fools!" he roared, pointing with his sword.

Something in his tone caught the attention of the battle-crazed mob. Men froze in their places and twisted their heads to stare. Conan was pointing to a soldier on the footwalk. The man was reeling, clawing the air, and choking as he tried to shout. He pitched headlong to the ground, and all saw the black arrow standing out from between his shoulders.



A cry of alarm arose from the compound. On the heels of the shout came a clamor of blood-freezing screams and the shattering impact of axes on the gate. Flaming arrows arched over the wall and stuck in logs, and thin wisps of blue smoke curled upward. Then, from behind the huts that ranged the south wall, came swift and furtive figures racing across the compound.

"The Picts are in!" roared Conan.

Bedlam followed his shout. The freebooters ceased their feud. Some turned to meet the savages; some sprang to the wall. Savages were pouring from behind the huts and streaming over the compound; their axes clashed against the cutlasses of the sailors.

Zarono was still struggling to his feet when a painted savage rushed upon him from behind and brained him with a war-axe.

Conan, with a clump of sailors behind him, was battling with the Picts inside the stockade; Strombanni, with most of his men, was

climbing up on the stockade, slashing at the dark figures already swarming over the wall. The Picts, who had crept up unobserved and surrounded the fort while the defenders were fighting among themselves, were attacking from all sides. Valenso's soldiers were clustered at the gate, trying to hold it against a howling swarm of exultant demons who thundered against it from the outside with a tree trunk.

More and more savages streamed from behind the huts, having scaled the undefended south wall. Strombanni and his pirates were beaten back from the other sides of the palisade, and in an instant the compound was swarming with naked warriors. They dragged down the defenders like wolves; the battle resolved into swirling whirlpools of painted figures surging about small groups of desperate white men. Picts, sailors, and men-at-arms littered the earth, stamped underfoot by the heedless feet.



Blood-smeared braves dived howling into huts, and shrieks rose above the din of battle as women and children died beneath the red axes. When they heard those pitiful cries, the men-at-arms abandoned the gate, and in an instant the Picts had burst it and were pouring into the palisade at that point also. Huts began to go up in flames.

"Make for the manor!" roared Conan, and a dozen men surged in behind him as he hewed an inexorable way through the snarling pack.

Strombanni was at his side, wielding his red cutlass like a flail. "We can't hold the manor," grunted the pirate.

"Why not?" Conan was too busy with his crimson work to spare a glance.

"Because — uh!" a knife in a dark hand sank deep in the Barachan's back. "Devil eat you, bastard!" Strombanni turned staggeringly and split the savage's skull to his teeth. The pirate reeled and fell to his knees, blood starting from his lips.

"The manor's burning!" he croaked, and slumped over in the dust.

Conan cast a swift look about him. The men who had followed him were all down in their blood. The Pict gasping out his life under the Cimmerian's feet was the last of the group that had barred his way. All about him, battle was swirling and surging, but for the moment he stood alone.

He was not far from the south wall. A few strides and he could leap to the ledge, swing over, and be gone through the night. But he remembered the helpless girls in the manor — from which, now, smoke was rolling in billowing masses. He ran toward the manor.



A feathered chief wheeled from the door, lifting a war-axe, and, behind the racing Cimmerian, lines of fleet-footed braves were converging upon him. He did not check his stride. His downward-sweeping cutlass met and deflected the axe and split the skull of the wielder. An instant later, Conan was through the door and had slammed and bolted it against the axes that thudded into the wood.

The great hall was full of drifting wisps of smoke, through which he groped, half blinded. Somewhere a woman was whimpering little, catchy, hysterical sobs of nerve-shattering horror. He emerged from a whorl of smoke and stopped dead in his tracks, glaring down the hall.

The hall was dim and shadowy with drifting smoke. The great silver candelabrum was overturned, the candles extinguished; the only illumination was a lurid glow from the great fireplace and the wall in which it was set, where the flames licked from burning floor to smoking roof beams. And limned against that lurid glare, Conan saw a human worm swinging slowly at the end of a rope. The dead face,

distorted beyond recognition, turned toward him as the body swung; but Conan knew it was Count Valenso, hanged to his own roof beam.

But there was something else in the hall. Conan saw it through the drifting smoke: a monstrous black figure, outlined against the hell-fire glare. That outline was vaguely human, although the shadow thrown on the burning wall was not human at all.



"Crom!" muttered Conan aghast, paralyzed by the realization that he was confronted by a being against whom his sword was

useless. He saw Belesa and Tina, clutched in each other's arms, crouching at the bottom of the stair.

The black monster reared up, looming gigantic against the flame, great arms spread wide. A dim face leered through the drifting smoke — semi-human, demoniac, altogether terrible. Conan glimpsed the dose-set horns, the gaping mouth, the peaked ears. It was lumbering toward him through the smoke, and an old memory woke with desperation.

Near the Cimmerian lay the great overturned candelabrum, once the pride of Korzetta Castle: fifty pounds of massy silver, intricately worked with figures of gods and heroes. Conan grasped it and heaved it high above his head.



"Silver and fire!" he roared in a voice like a clap of wind, and hurled the candelabrum with all the power of his iron muscles. Full on the great black breast it crashed, fifty pounds of silver winged with terrific velocity. Not even the black one could stand before such a

missile. The demon was carried off its feet — hurtled back into the open fireplace, which was a roaring mouth of flame. A horrible scream shook the hall, the cry of an unearthly thing gripped suddenly by earthly death. The mantel cracked, and stones fell from the great chimney, half hiding the black, writhing limbs at which the flames ate in elemental fury. Burning beams crashed down from the roof and thundered on the stones, and the whole heap was enveloped in a roaring burst of fire.



Flames were creeping down the stair when Conan reached it. He caught up the fainting child under one arm and dragged Belesa to

her feet. Through the crackle and snap of the fire sounded the splintering of the front door under the war-axes.

He glared about, sighted a door opposite the stair landing, and hurried through it, carrying Tina and dragging Belesa, who seemed dazed. As they came into the chamber beyond, a crash behind them announced that the roof was falling in the hall. Through a strangling wall of smoke, Conan saw an open, outer door on the other side of the chamber. As he lugged his charges through it, he saw that it sagged on broken hinges, lock and bolt snapped and splintered as if by some terrific force.

"The devil came in by this door!" Belesa sobbed hysterically. "I saw him — but I did not know —"

They emerged into the firelit compound a few feet from the row of huts that lined the south wall. A Ret was skulking toward the door, eyes red in the firelight and axe lifted. Dropping Tina and swinging Belesa away from the blow, Conan snatched out his cutlass and drove it through the savage's breast. Then, sweeping both girls off their feet, he ran, carrying them, toward the south wall.

The compound was full of billowing smoke-clouds that half hid the red work going on there, but the fugitives had been seen. Naked figures, black against the dull glare, pranced out of the smoke, brandishing gleaming axes. They were still yards behind him when Conan ducked into the space between the huts and the wall. At the other end of the corridor, he saw other howling shapes, running to cut him off.

Halting short, he tossed Belesa bodily to the footwalk, then Tina, and then leaped up after them. Swinging Belesa over the palisade, he dropped her into the sand outside, and dropped Tina after her. A thrown axe crashed into a log by his shoulder, and then he, too, was over the wall and gathering up his dazed and helpless charges. When the Picts reached the wall, the space before the palisade was empty of all except the dead.





8. Swords of Aquilonia

Dawn was tinging the dim waters an old-rose hue. Far out across the tinted waters, a fleck of white grew out of the mist — a sail that seemed to hang suspended in the pearly sky. On a bushy headland, Conan the Cimmerian held a ragged cloak over a fire of green wood. As he manipulated the cloak, puffs of smoke rose upward, quivered against the dawn, and vanished.

Belesa crouched near him, one arm about Tina. She asked: "Do you think they'll see it and understand?"

"They'll see it, right enough," he assured her. "They've been hanging off this coast all night, hoping to sight some survivors. They're scared stiff; there's only half a dozen of them, and not one can navigate well enough to sail from here to the Barachan Isles. They'll understand my signals; 'tis the pirate code. They'll be glad to ship under me, since I'm the only captain left."

"But suppose the Picts see the smoke?" She shuddered, glancing back over the misty sands and bushes to where, miles to the north, a column of smoke stood up in the still air.

"They're not likely to see it. After I hid you in the woods, I crept back and saw them dragging barrels of wine and ale out of the storehouses. Already most of them were reeling. By this time, they'll all be lying around, too drunk to move. If I had a hundred men, I could wipe out the whole horde — Crom and Mitra!" he cried suddenly. "That's not the *Red Hand* after all, but a war galley! What civilized state would send a unit of its fleet hither? Unless somebody would have words with your uncle, in which case they'll need a spaewoman *to* raise his ghost."

He scowled out to sea in an effort to make out the details of the craft through the mist. The approaching ship was bow-on, so that all he could see was a gilded bow ornament, a small sail bellying in the faint onshore breeze, and the bank of oars on each side rising and falling like a single pair.

"Well," said Conan, "at least they're coming to take us off. It would be a long walk back to Zingara. Until we find out who they are and whether they're friendly, say naught of who I am. I'll think of a proper tale by the time they get here."

Conan stamped out the fire, handed the cloak back to Belesa, and stretched like a great, lazy cat. Belesa watched him in wonder. His unperturbed manner was not assumed; the night of fire and blood and slaughter, and the flight through the black woods afterward, had left his nerves untouched. He was as calm as if he had spent the night in feasting and revel. Bandages torn from the hem of Belesa's gown covered a few minor wounds that he had received in fighting without armor.

Belesa did not fear him; she felt safer than she had felt since she landed on that wild coast. He was not like the freebooters, civilized men who had repudiated all standards of honor and lived without any. Conan, on the other hand, lived according to the code of his people, which was barbaric and bloody but at least upheld its own peculiar standards of honor.

"Think you he is dead?" she asked.

He did not ask her to whom she referred. "I believe so," he replied. "Silver and fire are both deadly to evil spirits, and he got a bellyfull of both."

"How about his master?"

"Thoth-Amon? Gone back to lurk in some Stygian tomb, I suppose. These wizards are a queer lot."

Neither spoke of that subject again; Belesa's mind shrank from the task of conjuring up the scene when a black figure skulked into the great hall, and a long-delayed vengeance was horribly consummated.



The ship was larger, but some time would yet elapse before it made shore. Belesa asked:

"When you first came to the manor, you said something of having been a general in Aquilonia and then having to flee. What is the tale on that?"

Conan grinned. "Put it down to my own folly in trusting that quince-faced Numedides. They made me general because of some small successes against the Picts; and then, when I'd scattered five times my own number of savages in a battle at Velitrium and broken their confederacy, I was called back to Tarantia for an official triumph. All very tickling to the vanity, riding beside the king while girls scatter rose petals before you; but then at the banquet the bastard plied me with drugged wine. I woke up in chains in the Iron Tower, awaiting execution."

"Whatever for?"

He shrugged. "How know I what goes on in what that numb-wit calls his brain? Perhaps some of the other Aquilonian generals, resentful of the sudden rise of an outland barbarian into their sacred ranks, had worked upon his suspicions. Or perhaps he took offense at some of my frank remarks about his policy of spending the royal treasury to adorn Tarantia with golden statues of himself instead of for the defense of his frontiers.

"The philosopher Alcemides confided to me, just before I quaffed the drugged draught, that he hoped to write a book on the use of ingratitude as a principle of statecraft, using the king as a model. Heigh-ho! I was too drunk to *realize* he was trying to warn me.

"I had, however, friends with whose aid I was smuggled out of the Iron Tower, given a horse and a sword, and turned loose. I rode back to Bossonia with the idea of raising a revolt, beginning with my own troops. But, when I got there, I found my sturdy Bossonians gone, sent to another province, and in their place a brigade of ox-eyed yokels from the Tauran, most of whom had never heard of me. They insisted on trying to arrest me, so I had to split a few skulls in cutting my way out. I swam Thunder River with arrows whizzing about my ears... and here I am."

He frowned out toward the approaching ship again. "By Crom, I'd swear yonder ensign bore the leopard of Poitain, did I not know it

were a thing impossible. Come."

He led the girls down to the beach as the chant of the coxswain became audible. With a final heave on the oars, the crew drove the galley's bow with a rush up the sand. As men tumbled off the bow, Conan yelled:

"Prospero! Trocero! What in the name of all the gods are you doing . . ."

"Conan!" they roared, and closed in on him, pounding his back and wringing his hands. All spoke at once, but Belesa did not understand the speech, which was that of Aquilonia. The one referred to as "Trocero" must be the Count of Poitain, a broad-shouldered, slim-hipped man who moved with the grace of a panther despite the gray in his black hair.

"What do you here?" persisted Conan.

"We came for you," said Prospero, the slim, elegantly-clad one.

"How did you know where I was?"

The stout, bald man addressed as "Publius" gestured toward another man in the black robe of a priest of Mitra. "Dexitheus found you by his occult arts. He swore you still lived and promised to lead us to you."

The black-robed man bowed gravely. "Your destiny is linked with that of Aquilonia, Conan of Cimmeria," he said. "I am but one small link in the chain of your fate."

"Well, what's this all about?" said Conan. "Crom knows I'm glad to be rescued from this forsaken sandspit, but why came you after me?"

Trocero spoke: "We have broken with Numedides, being unable longer to endure his follies and oppressions, and we seek a general to lead the forces of revolt. You're our man!"

Conan laughed gustily and stuck his thumbs in his girdle. "It's good to find some who understand true merit. Lead me to the fray, my friends!" He glanced around and his eyes caught Belesa, standing timidly apart from the group. He gestured her forward with rough

gallantry. "Gentlemen, the Lady Belesa of Korzetta." Then he spoke to the girl in her own language again. "We can take you back to Zingara, but what will you do then?"

She shook her head helplessly. "I know not I have neither money nor friends, and I am not trained to earn my living. Perhaps it would have been better had one of those arrows struck my heart"



"Do not say that, my lady!" begged Tina. "I will work for us both!"

Conan drew a small leather bag from his girdle. "I didn't get Tothmekri's jewels," he rumbled, "but here are some baubles I found in the chest where I got the clothes I'm wearing." He spilled a handful of flaming rubies into his palm. "They're worth a fortune, themselves." He dumped them back into the bag and handed it to her.

"But I can't take these —" she began.

"Of course you shall take them! I might as well leave you for the Picts to scalp as to take you back to Zingara to starve," said he. "I know what it is to be penniless in a Hyborian land. Now, in my

country, sometimes there are famines; but people go hungry only when there's no food in the land at all. But in civilized countries I've seen people sick of gluttony while others were starving. Aye, I've seen men fall and die of hunger against the walls of shops and storehouses crammed with food.

"Sometimes I was hungry, too, but then I took what I wanted at sword's point. But you can't do that. So you take these rubies. You can sell them and buy a castle, and slaves, and fine clothes, and with them it won't be hard to get a husband, because civilized men all desire wives with these possessions."

"But what of you?"

Conan grinned and indicated the circle of Aquilonians. "Here's my fortune. With these true friends, I shall have all the wealth in Aquilonia at my feet."

The stout Publius spoke up: "Your generosity does you credit, Conan, but I wish you had consulted with me first. For revolutions are made not only by wrongs, but also by gold; and Numedides' publicans have so beggared Aquilonia that we shall be hard put to find the money to hire mercenaries."

"Ha!" laughed Conan. "I'll get you gold enough to set every blade in Aquilonia swinging!" In a few words he told of the treasure of Tranicos and of the destruction of Valenso's settlement. "Now the demon's gone from the cave; the Picts will be scattering to their villages. With a detail of well-armed men, we can make a quick march to the cavern and back before they realize we're in Pictland. Are you with me?"

They cheered until Belesa feared that their noise would draw the attention of the Picts. Conan cast her a sly grin and muttered in Zingaran, under cover of the racket:

"How d'you like King Conan'? Sounds not bad, eh?"



The Trail of Tranicos

by L. Sprague de Camp



When, in 1951, I discovered three apparently unpublished Conan stories, I edited them for magazine publication, then edited them some more for book publication, and lastly edited them once more for publication in the Ace paperback series. In addition, I learned that Howard himself rewrote two of them, so altogether these stories have seen many forms.

Of the three, "The Frost-Giant's Daughter" was one of the first Conan stories that Howard wrote and one of several such stories that he submitted to Farnsworth Wright of *Weird Tales* about the beginning of 1932. Of these, Wright accepted "The Phoenix on the Sword" — the first Conan story to be published — and, on 10 March, 1932, rejected the rest. About two years later, Howard rewrote "The Frost-Giant's Daughter" as "Gods of the North," changing the name of the hero from Conan to Amra of Akibitana but otherwise leaving the tale as it was, for publication in Charles D. Homig's pioneer fan magazine, *The Fantasy Fan*.

Howard wanted to see the story in print but had no hope of selling it commercially, since no magazines other than *Weird Tales* were buying fiction of that kind at the time. And he changed the hero's name because, by this time, the Conan stories were doing well and he thought it imprudent to give any of them away free. The story has since been reprinted both in its Conan form and its Amra form.

"The Black Stranger" has an even more labyrinthine history, which I thought might interest Howard buffs and bibliographers.

Judging from the appearance of the manuscript, Glenn Lord thinks that Howard probably wrote the story (30,000 words) around 1933-34. Evidently Farnsworth Wright rejected it. A year or so later, Howard rewrote the story as a 25,000-word Spanish Main pirate yarn, "Swords of the Red Brotherhood." He sent it to Otis Kline Associates on 28 May, 1935.*[There it reason to think that the pirate version came before the Conan one.]

The course of the manuscript during the next three years is not known. Eventually, Kline submitted it to *Golden Fleece*, a magazine of historical adventure fiction, which appeared from 10-38 to 6-29. *Golden Fleece* ceased publication soon after receiving the Howard manuscript The manuscript was returned — Howard being dead by this time — and that is the last record of any submission.

In this rewrite (never published) Howard deleted most of the supernatural elements, changed the names of nearly all the characters, and introduced matchlock muskets and other props suitable for a story of the early seventeenth century. The scene is the *west* coast of America, whither Count Henri d'Chastillon has fled to escape an African wizard whom he had once double-crossed in a slaving deal. Actually, the scenery and the Indians are those of the eastern woodlands of aboriginal North America, not at all like California with its towering mountains and timid, acorn-grinding natives. Moreover, Howard evidently had little French, since "d'Castillon" is an impossible name.

The Conan of the original story was transformed into another one of Conan's fictional doublets: Terence Vulmea, a gigantic Irishman impelled by English persecution to flee Ireland and turn pirate. Vulmea appears in one other Howard story: "Black Vulmea's Vengeance" (15,000 words) published in *Golden Fleece* for November, 1938. The plot of this novelette has much in common with "The Black Stranger." Vulmea leads an enemy — a British naval captain — on a treasure hunt on the Peruvian coast, with everybody double-crossing everybody else and hordes of savages lurking to pounce. This hero is called simply "Black Vulmea" in "Swords of the Red Brotherhood," but

his given name appears in "Black Vulmea's Vengeance." The names "Tranicos" (who plays a role in "The Black Stranger") and "Villiers" (who plays a role in "Swords of the Red Brotherhood") are alluded to as those of notorious pirates.

In February, 1952, I rewrote "The Black Stranger." Not being sure that I could sell the story without drastic improvement, I edited it with a heavy hand. To speed up the narrative, I condensed it by more than 15% by many small cuts of what seemed otiose verbiage. Since the original story was only weakly tied in with the rest of the saga, I added interpolations to bring in King Numedides, Thoth-Amon, and the subsequent revolution in Aquilonia.

Selon Howard, the menace in the cave was a lethal volcanic gas. Count Valenso's slayer was a black demon sent from afar by an unnamed wizard whom the Count had cheated. I put the demon in the cave in place of the gas, called in the vengeful wizard Thoth-Amon, and brought the latter to the scene of the action to free the demon from the cave and direct it against the Count. At the end, Howard has Conan abandon the quest for the jewels in the cave and signal the pirate ship *Red Hand*, proposing to sail away as its captain to another orgy of piracy. Because this would have entailed serious chronological difficulties, I made the ship a galley bearing Aquilonian rebels looking for Conan to lead their uprising.

Thinking that too many of Howard's titles had "black" in them, I changed the title to "The Treasure of Tranicos." For various reasons, I also changed the names of several characters.

This manuscript went to Lester del Rey, editor of *Fantasy Magazine*, wherein it appeared in the March, 1953, issue. Lester had taken his turn at improving the story. He preferred the original title, "The Black Stranger," so thus it appeared. He added a new beginning of four paragraphs, from "Count Valenso . . ." to ". . . writhing again." He added the fight with the demon. He deleted my reference, in Conan's tale, to the philosopher Alcemides.

When Greenberg published this story in KING CONAN, he used the del Rey version as it stood, but with my title, "The Treasure of Tranicos."

When I made up a manuscript for the Lancer (now Ace) paperback, *Conan The Usurper*, I typed a new version of the story, working from Howard's original ms and my own version of 1952. No longer worried about selling the story and wishing to give the reader something as close as was practical to Howard's original, I edited Howard's text much more lightly, leaving in all the corn. Not trying to condense the tale, I made only such changes as seemed urgently needed I omitted Lester's additions (which never convinced me — I hope not because of vanity) but kept the interpolations that I had inserted to tie the story in with the rest of the epic. I kept my tide, "The Treasure of Tranicos," not only because of Howard's excessive fondness for "black," but also because the "stranger" was now not a demon but the Stygian he-witch Thoth-Amon, who was brown rather than black. I went back to Howard's original names for characters, with two exceptions: Strombanni, whom Howard had called "Strom," and Gebellez, whom he had called "Gebbrelo." Now, "Strom" is a real name, but North European — Anglo-Scandinavian. (Cf. Senator Strom Thurmond.) And all the other Argosseans named by Howard have Italianate names like "Tito" and "Demetrio." Therefore I kept "Strombanni." And "Gebbrelo" is too much like "Galbro," the name of another character in the same story.

To distinguish among these versions, here is a table of the characters in the story in its various incarnations. I is Howard's original "The Black Stranger." U is "Swords of the Red Brotherhood." III is my 1952 rewrite of "The Black Stranger." IV is del Rev's modification of my rewrite, published in *Fantasy Magazine* as "The Black Stranger" and in *King Conan* as "The Treasure of Tranicos." If I and IV are lumped together because all the characters have the same names in both. V is my latest version, which has appeared in *Conan The Usurper*, and as the Sunridge illustrated novel, *The Treasure of Tranicos*.

The other two stories found in 1951 have a similar history of changes by me for their first publication and of later revisions that eliminated many of these changes and returned the story to a form

closer to Howard's original manuscript, but I do not think I need go into details.

I	II	III,IV	V
Conan	Terence Vulmea	Conan	Conan
Belesa of Korzetta	Francoise d'Chastillon	Belesa of Korzetta	Belesa of Korzetta
Tina	Tina	Tina	Tina
Count Valenso of Korzetta	Count Henri d'Chastillon	Count Valenso of Korzetta	Count Valenso of Korzetta
Galbro	Gallot	Galbro	Galbro
Zingelito	Jacques Piriou	Zorgelitas	Zingelito
Strom	Harston	Strombanni	Strombanni
Zarono	Guillaume Villiers	Zarrono	Zarono
Tranicos	Giovanni da Verrazano	Tranicos	Tranicos
Gebbrelo	Jacques	Gebellez	Gebellez
Galacus	Richardson	Galacus	Galacus
Anonymous demon	Anonymous Negro wizard	Thoth-Amon	Thoth-Amon
Bracus	Hawksby	Ottandro	Bracus
Tothmekri	Montezuma	Maatneb	Tothmekri

Skald in the Post Oaks

by L. Sprague de Camp

The land around Cross Plains, Texas, is flat with a gentle roll. In aboriginal days it was well-wooded country, covered by an open stand of a small oak, the post oak or jack oak. Cross Plains stands amid this flat, limitless vastness. And in Cross Plains dwelt Robert E. Howard (1906-36), the creator of Conan and, next to Tolkien, the most widely-read author of heroic fantasy.

Robert Ervin Howard was born in Peaster, Texas, near modern Weatherford. His father was Dr. Isaac Howard, a frontier physician. After several moves, about 1919 the family settled in Cross Plains, in almost the exact center of the state.

Today, Cross Plains harbors about 1,200 people — 300 fewer than when Howard lived. While Brownwood, forty-odd miles to the southeast, has during its time grown from 14,000 to 20,000, people say that time has passed Cross Plains by. Save for some new service stations, the town has changed little in recent decades. But Cross Plains is a pleasant-looking little town, with neat modern bungalows surrounded by the lawns and plantings of the typical contemporary suburban American home.

As a boy, Robert Howard was puny and bookish, with a schizoid personality. A schizoid pays less than normal heed to the effects of his acts upon others. In the current jargon, he fails to "relate" to them. Professional thinkers and writers, I suspect, are mostly somewhat schizoid, or they would not be thinkers and writers. When a schizoid personality is combined with a puny body and bookish tastes, the individual is a "misfit" and a natural butt of bullies. For such a wretch, boy life is a jungle, with the individual playing the role of a rabbit.

As he grew older, however, the harassed Howard embarked upon a rigorous program of weight-lifting, bag-punching, and other calisthenics. By the time he entered Cross Plains High School, he was a large, powerful youth. The bullying stopped, albeit Howard did not become a bully in his turn.

He remained a sport and exercise fanatic all his life. When fully grown, he was just under six feet tall and weighed around 200 pounds, nearly all of it muscle. He was an accomplished boxer and

rider, owning a horse, and a boxing and football fan. Nobody bothered him then, but his boyhood left him with a permanent streak of cynical misanthropy.

Since the public schools in Cross Rains went only as far as the tenth grade, in 1922 Howard's parents sent him to Brownwood for a year at Brownwood High School. Three years later, they sent him to Brownwood again for a year at Howard Payne Academy, a preparatory school run in connection with Howard Payne College. He graduated from the Academy in 1927.

The following year, he took commercial courses at the college in "shorthand, typing, business arithmetic, and commercial law" but received no college credits. He later wrote: "A literary college education probably would have helped me immensely . . . I might have liked college . . . That's neither here nor there, I didn't feel that I could afford it . . ." At this time, Howard was educating himself by wide reading. During summers (he claimed) he broke into locked schoolhouses and carried off the books in a bag; but he always returned them.

In 1921, at fifteen, Howard chose writing as his career and sent a story to *Adventure Magazine*, whence it promptly returned. In 1923, *Weird Tales* was launched. In the fall of 1924, at Brownwood, Howard sold his first commercial story: a cave-man tale, "Spear and Fang." *Weird Tales* had just come under the editorship of Farnsworth Wright, who paid Howard \$16.00 for his piece.

Besides his studies, Howard held minor jobs like surveying and soda-jerking. He joined a coterie of eight or ten young people of literary tastes, living in or near Brownwood. He continued writing for *Weird Tales*; during the next two years he sold that magazine four more stories. All were undistinguished fictions of the standard *WT* type: "The Lost Race" a tale of conflict between Celt and Pict in ancient Britain; "The Hyena" and "Wolfshead" about African lycanthropy.

Such a time of groping and struggle is usual in a writer's career. Howard's distinction is that he did so well for a completely self-taught

writer, dwelling in an uncongenial environment and isolated from professional contacts.

In 1928, Howard set down on paper a fictional character whom he had long borne in mind: Solomon Kane, an English Puritan of the late sixteenth century. The story was "Red Shadows," published in *Weird Tales* for August, 1928. Kane differs from most of Howard's heroes, who were brawny, brawling, belligerent adventurers. Kane is somber of dress, dour of manner, rigid of principles, and driven by a demonic urge to wander, to seek danger, and to right wrongs. In the Kane stories, some of which take place in Europe and some in Africa, Kane undergoes gory adventures and overcomes supernatural menaces.

Howard was now making a meager living from his writings. *Weird Tales* remained his principal market, even though in 1929 he branched out, with stories in *Argosy All-Story Weekly* and *Fight Stories*. In the decade following "Red Shadows," he appeared in about two thirds of all issues of *Weird Tales*, even though many appearances were only of poems.

Howard produced a sizable volume of poetry, much of which has been published. Like his prose, his verse is vigorous, colorful, strongly rhythmic, and technically adroit, despite the fact that he said: "I know nothing at all about the mechanics of poetry — I couldn't tell you whether a verse was anapestic or trochaic to save my neck."

¹[From an unpublished letter by Robert E. Howard; by permission of Glenn Lord.]

Now and then, Howard took off in his Chevrolet for a long drive to some historic site in the Southwest or to Mexico; but he always returned to Cross Plains. He continued his physical routine; lean at twenty, he became massive as he neared thirty. In maturity he was a big, heavy-set man with black hair, blue eyes under heavy black brows, a round, slightly jowly face, and a deep but soft voice.

He drank — mostly beer — but did not smoke. He was known to get drunk, but rarely, and he never got into fights. The drunken brawls and wenching at which his letters hint were, my informants agreed, mostly or wholly imaginary.

Howard was a man of emotional extremes and of violent likes and dislikes. His personality was introverted, moody, and unconventional. When he felt like it, he could hold forth brilliantly on almost any subject; but he might instead go into a fit of gloom and say nothing to a friend who had come a long way to see him. He was hot-tempered, flaring up easily but cooling off just as quickly. Even his close friends found him an enigma. As one of them put it:

"He just didn't give a damn for a lot of things that other people do."

With such a voracious reader, it is hard to be sure that he was *not* influenced by any given predecessor. Jack London was one of his favorite writers, and he esteemed Sir Richard F. Burton's narratives of travel and exploration. In his stories, the influence of London and of Robert W. Chambers, Talbot Mundy, Harold Lamb, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Sax Rohmer, and H. P. Lovecraft is patent.

Three strong influences on Howard's fiction were, first, the romantic primitivism of London and Burroughs; second, a fascination with Celtic history and legend; and third, the racial beliefs current in the United States in the 1920s. Howard's primitivism is summed up by a remark made by a character in "Beyond the Black River": "Barbarism is the natural state of mankind. Civilization is unnatural, it is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must always ultimately triumph." He argued at length in his correspondence with H. P. Lovecraft, upholding the superiority of barbarism over civilization.

Howard gave vent to his primitivism in the stories he wrote in 1929 about a gigantic barbarian hero named Kull. A native of stone-age Atlantis, Kull makes his way to the main or Thurian continent, becomes a soldier in Valusia, and usurps the throne of that kingdom. As King Kull, he encounters sorcerers, pre-human reptile men, and a talking cat. Howard sent several of these stories to *Weird Tales*. Wright accepted two — "The Shadow Kingdom" and "The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune" — and rejected the rest.

Of remotely Scotch-Irish descent, Howard made an affectation of Celticism. One St. Patrick's day, he appeared in a green bow tie two feet across. He exploited his Celtomania by stories laid in the British

Isles in ancient and medieval times, dealing with the struggles of Pict and Briton, of Briton and Roman, and of Gael and Norseman.

Many of Howard's views would today be stigmatized by that all-purpose pejorative "racist." In presenting a racist view, Howard merely followed most popular writers of the time, to whom ethnic stereotypes were stock in trade. Writers and readers alike took it for granted that fictional Scots should be thrifty, Irishmen funny, Germans arrogant, Jews avaricious, Negroes childish, Latins lecherous, and Orientals sinister. Howard's racial attitudes were compounded by a conventional Southern white outlook, including a sentimental sympathy for the Confederacy.

Howard's primitivism, however, gave his ethnic attitudes an element of paradox. He might view Negroes as incurably barbaric; but to him that was not altogether bad, since he thought that barbarians had virtues lacking in civilized men. In criticizing French novelists, he said: "Dumas has a virility lacking in other French writers — I attribute it to his negroid strain . . ." ¹[From an unpublished letter by Robert E. Howard; by permission of Glenn Lord.] If a racist, Howard was a comparatively mild one; and his writings imply that, as with Lovecraft, his ethnic prejudices abated as he grew older.

Politically — racial questions aside — Howard was a vigorously antiauthoritarian liberal. When Lovecraft praised Mussolini, Howard took vehement exception.

With the opening of wider markets, Howard was busier than ever during 1929-32. He wrote several weirds in the frame of Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos. He widened his production to include sport, adventure, oriental, and historical stories. He sustained personal misadventures; later he wrote Clark Ashton Smith:

For a fellow who has always lived a quiet, peaceful, and really prosaic life, I've had my share of narrow shaves: horses running away with me and falling on me; one threw me and then jumped on me; one turned a complete somersault in mid-air and landed on her back which would have mashed me like a bed-bug if I hadn't been

hurled over her head as she fell; went head-on through a bedroom window once; knife stuck into my leg behind the knee, once, a hair's breadth from that big artery that runs there; stepped right over a diamond-bucked rattler in the dark, etc. ²[From Amra, II, 39; copyright © 1966 by the Terminus, Owlswick, & Ft Mudge Electrkk Street Railway Gazette; by permission of G. H. Sdthers.]

There were also darker sides to Howard's character. As early as 1923 he began toying with the idea of suicide. This is not unusual with adolescents, but in Howard's case the idea grew stronger with time. He was heard to say: "My father is a man and can take care of himself, but I've got to stay on as long as my mother is alive."³[From The Howard Collector, 1, 4, p. 7; 1, 5, p. 9; copyright © 1964 by Glenn Lord; by permission of Glenn Lord.] Some of his poems express the wish to be quit

Of this world of human cattle,

All this dreary noise and prattle.

As one can see from Howard's really rather quiet and secluded life, the din and struggle of which he complained were all within him.

The mutual devotion between Howard and his mother is a classical case of the Oedipus complex. In his late twenties, a decade after most youths do, Howard at last began to go with girls. For years he had excused his misogyny by saying: "Aw, what woman could ever look at a big, ugly hulk like me?" But, when Howard began at last to display a normal male regard for women, his mother discouraged this new interest. One visitor reported that, when a girl called Howard on the telephone, Mrs. Howard told the caller that he was not in, although he was and she knew it.

Howard's father, Isaac Howard, seems to have been an extremely bossy, self-assertive, overbearing man — an unattractive domestic tyrant, although E. Hoffmann Price (the only professional writer Howard ever met) liked the doctor when he visited Cross Plains. Doctor Howard and his son quarreled frequently and furiously, often because Howard took his father to task for neglecting his

mother. Although they quickly made up these quarrels, there seems to have been little love lost between them.

Howard also began to show symptoms of paranoid delusions of persecution. He took to carrying a Colt automatic pistol against probably imaginary "enemies." The local people regarded him as a "harmless freak." They asked him when he was going to quit fooling around with stories and settle down to real work, even when he was working longer hours and making more money than most Cross Plainsians. But despite the hostile human environment, he stubbornly stuck to Cross Plains.

In 1932, Howard made up his most successful character: Conan the Cimmerian. He wrote:

*It may sound fantastic to link the term "realism" with Conan; but as a matter of fact — his supernatural adventures aside — he is the most realistic character I have ever evolved. He is simply a combination of a number of men I have known, and I think that's why he seemed to step full-grown into my consciousness when I wrote the first yarn of the series. Some mechanism in my sub-consciousness took the dominant characteristics of various prizefighters, gunmen, bootleggers, oil field bullies, gamblers, and honest workmen I have come in contact with, and combining them all, produced the amalgamation I call Conan the Cimmerian.*³[From The Howard Collector, 1, 4, p. 7; 1, 5, p. 9; copyright © 1964 by Glenn Lord; by permission of Glenn Lord.]

In conceiving Conan, Howard invented a whole world to go with him. He assumed that about 12,000 years ago, after the sinking of Atlantis and before recorded history, there was a Hyborian Age, when

. . . shining kingdoms lay spread across the world like blue mantles beneath the stars — Nemedia, Ophir, Brythunia, Hyperborea, Zamora with its dark-haired women and towers of spider-haunted mystery, Zingara with its chivalry, Koth that

bordered on the pastoral lands of Shem, Stygia with its shadow-guarded tombs, Hyrkania whose riders wore steel and silk and gold. But the proudest kingdom of the world was Aquilonia, reigning supreme in the dreaming west.

Conan was a development of King Kull and also an idealization of Howard himself, a gigantic barbarian adventurer from the northern land of Cimmeria, who, after a lifetime of wading through rivers of gore and daunting foes both natural and supernatural, rises to king of Aquilonia.

Howard envisaged the entire life of Conan, from birth to old age, and caused him to grow and develop like a real man. At the start, Conan is merely a lawless, reckless, irresponsible, predatory youth with few virtues save courage, loyalty to his few friends, and a rough-and-ready chivalry towards women. In time he learns not only caution and prudence but also duty and responsibility, until by middle age he has matured enough to make a good king. On the contrary, many heroes of heroic fantasy seem, like the characters of Homer and of P. G. Wodehouse, to have the enviable faculty of staying the same age for half a century at a stretch.

The self-taught Howard achieved a preeminently sound, eloquent prose style. He wrote in sentences of short to medium length and simple construction, as others learned to do after the Hemingway revolution of the thirties. He could give the impression of a highly colorful scene while making only sparing use of action-slowing adjectives and adverbs. He was a devotee of the "well-wrought tale" as opposed to the "slice-of-life" school of fiction. Stories of either kind have their place; but for pure, escapist entertainment — which Howard's stories were meant to be — the former type is more suitable.

As a writer, Howard had faults as well as virtues. His faults arose mainly from haste. Hence his stories contain many inconsistencies and slipshod carelessnesses. He tended to repeat certain elements in story after story: the combat with a gigantic serpent (Howard said he hated snakes) or man-ape; the vast, green stone city built on the

lines of the Pentagon; the flying menace in the form of a winged ape or demon.

Critics have also held against Howard the author's immaturity in human relationships, especially in his heroes' attitude towards women, and the violence of the tales. Conan swaggers about the Hyborian scene, bedding one willing wench after another; but women are viewed as mere toys. True, Conan at last takes a legitimate queen, but this is a mere afterthought. Howard was evidently as uncomfortable with love as the small boy who, viewing a Western, is loudly disgusted when the hero kisses the heroine instead of his horse. Furthermore, one critic was so staggered by the splashing of gore that he said Howard's stories "project the immature fantasy of a split mind and logically pave the way to schizophrenia."

What seems like excessive bloodshed and emotional immaturity, however, were normal in the pulp fiction of Howard's time. Writers did not then deem it their duty to endow their heroes with social consciousness, to sympathize with downtrodden ethnics, to detail the mechanical problems of copulation, and to make it plain that they were on the side of peace, equality, and social welfare.

Withal, Howard was a natural storyteller, and this is the *sine qua non* of fiction-writing. With this knack, many of a writer's faults can be overlooked; without it, no other virtues do any good. Whatever their shortcomings, Howard's writings will long be enjoyed for their zest, vigor, furious action, and headlong narrative drive; for his "purple and golden and crimson universe where anything can happen — except the tedious."

Beginning in 1932, most of Howard's time was taken up with the Conan stories. For months, the mighty Cimmerian obsessed him to the exclusion of all else. Then he branched out into detective stories and Westerns. The detective stories, which contained fantastic elements like sinister oriental cults and African leopard-men, were no great success even though Howard sold several.

He did better with his Westerns. After he engaged Otis Adelbert Kline as his literary agent in 1933, he found his Western market expanding. Over twenty stories in this genre were sold in the three

years before his death. Many were informed with a broad frontier humor, close to burlesque.

Humor was a new departure for Howard, whose previous stories had nearly all been somber in tone. Some critics consider his Westerns his best work. His Western heroes are as big as Conan, even less bright, and genial in a homicidal way. Howard explained his preference for heroes of mighty thews and simple minds:

"They're simpler. You get them in a jam, and no one expects you to rack your brains inventing clever ways for them to extricate themselves. They are too stupid to do anything but cut, shoot, or slug themselves into the clear." ⁴[From Robert E. Howard: *Skull-Face and Others*, pp. xv, xxii, copyright 1946 by August Derleth; by permission of August Derleth.]

In one of his last letters, Howard indicated that he might quit fantasy: "I'm seriously contemplating devoting all my time and efforts to Western writing, abandoning all other forms of work entirely . . ."

¹[From an unpublished letter by Robert E. Howard; by permission of Glenn Lord.]

The years 1933-36 were busy. Howard's Western market was growing, and for a while he earned the most money of any man in Cross Plains. Of course, this was in the depths of the Great Depression, when \$2,500.00 a year was an opulent income. Howard's circumstances were never exactly easy, since word rates were low, magazines on which he had counted failed, and his mother's illness caused him heavy expenses. Mrs. Howard had been in poor health for years and now was in rapid decline. Still, whatever Howard's maladjustments, money troubles do not seem to have been among them.

His circle of correspondents grew, with many letters passing between him and Clark Ashton Smith and between him and H. P. Lovecraft. He dated Novalyne Price, a teacher of public speaking at the local high school. She was considered a little eccentric, too, being such a perfectionist with her pupils that they repeatedly won the annual Texan University Interscholastic League contest in public speaking. In July, 1935, Howard temporarily broke off his friendship

with Miss Price by a bitter letter in which he accused her of making fun of him to a mutual friend behind his back.

Mrs. Howard's health continued to decline. On June 11, 1936, hopelessly ill, she was in a coma. The nurse told Howard that his mother would never regain consciousness. Howard went out and got into his car. About 8:00 a.m., still in the car, he shot himself through the head with his pistol. His suicide was not the result of any sudden impulse, for the previous week he had sent the Kline agency a manuscript with instructions for paying the money from its sale in case of his death.

Howard's suicide sent a wave of amazement and grief through his circle of friends and admirers. Lovecraft wrote: "That such a genuine artist should perish while hundreds of insincere hacks continue to concoct spurious ghosts and vampires and space-ships and occult detectives is indeed a sorry piece of cosmic irony!" ⁴[From Robert E. Howard: *Skull-Face and Others*, pp. xv, xxii, copyright 1946 by August Derleth; by permission of August Derleth.]

Dr. Isaac Howard inherited Howard's estate, and the Kline agency sold several of Howard's stories after his death. During the next decade, Howard's writings remained for the most part the private enthusiasm of a few admirers.

The first serious attempt to revive Howard came in 1946, when August Derleth published a collection of Howard's fiction as *Skull-Face and Others*. The reviewer for the *New York Times* was so appalled by the violence of Howard's stories that his review was devoted to warning against the schizophrenic perils of heroic fiction and said little about the stories.

Three years later, a small science-fiction publisher began to issue the Conan stories in a series of cloth-bound volumes. In 1951, I learned of a cache of Howard's manuscripts in the custody of a literary agent who had inherited Kline's agency. Finding three Conan stories among them, I edited these for publication and also rewrote four unpublished adventure stories by Howard, changing them to Conan stories. A Swedish admirer of Howard, Björn Nyberg, wrote a novel, *The Return of Conan*, on which I collaborated.

The definitive revival of Howard took place when Lancer Books began in 1966 to bring out the whole Conan corpus in paperback. A Texan admirer, Glenn Lord, became agent for Howard's writings and tracked down a mass of Howard's papers. These included six Conan stories, one complete and the rest fragments or outlines. Lin Carter and I have completed the unfinished stories and have written pastiches to fill the gaps in the saga. How well we have imitated Howard's style and spirit is not for me to say.

The Conan paperbacks touched off a general reprinting of Howard's stories. Within the last five years, at least nine books of Howard's non-Conanian stories have been published. Many tales by Howard, some previously published and some not, have appeared in magazines and anthologies. The magazine *Bestsellers* listed Howard among the eight writers of imaginative fiction whose books have, in the last thirty years, sold over a million copies. The others were Asimov, Bradbury, Burroughs, Heinlein, Andre Norton, E. E. Smith, and Tolkien.

I suspect that this revival is a reaction against some recent trends in fiction. Ever since the Hitlerian War, advance-guard writers have issued stories marked by certain features, carried to questionable extremes. One is the use of experimental narrative techniques: non-sentences, stream-of-consciousness, temporal disorganization, plotlessness, and so forth. Another is extreme subjectivity, or egotistical self-indulgence on the part of the writer. Another is obsession with contemporary social and political problems. Another is concentration on sex, especially in its more peculiar manifestations. Finally there is the vogue of the anti-hero. The protagonist is made, not a likable rogue like many former picaresque heroes, but a despicable rogue, a twerp with neither brains, brawn, nor character, who might have crawled out from under a flat rock.

All these developments have their place, up to a point. But, since they have all come at once and have been carried to often bizarre extremes, many readers enjoy for a change reading stories that point in the opposite direction. That is to say, stories of stalwart heroes doing heroic deeds, with plenty of hot action in romantic settings,

told in plain, lucid, straightforward prose, without mention of the school dropout problem or the woes of the sexual deviant or other contemporary difficulties. How far this reaction will go, no man knoweth; but while It endures, Howard's publishers stand to profit.

During this revival, Howard has slept beneath the large, plain gravestone in the Brownwood cemetery, where his parents also lie. A panel reads: "They were lovely and pleasant in other lives and in their death they were not divided" (2 Samuel I, 23). But the Howard family was not so harmonious as all that. A more fitting epitaph for Robert Howard would be Dr. John D. Clark's introduction to the Conan books: "And above all Howard was a story-teller."

Notes:

1. From an unpublished letter by Robert E. Howard; by permission of Glenn Lord.

2. From *Amra*, II, 39; copyright © 1966 by the Terminus, Owlswick, & Ft Mudge Electrick Street Railway Gazette; by permission of G. H. Sdthers.

3. From *The Howard Collector*, 1, 4, p. 7; 1, 5, p. 9; copyright © 1964 by Glenn Lord; by permission of Glenn Lord.

4. From Robert E. Howard: *Skull-Face and Others*, pp. xv, xxii, copyright 1946 by August Derleth; by permission of August Derleth.

CONAN

IN ALL HIS GLORY:

Amid the treachery of pirates, the intrigue of a doomed count, the fury of savage Picts, the flashing eyes and flowing hair of beautiful women, fierce swordplay and the deadly vengeance of a black magician, the greatest hero Hyboria has ever known picks his way like a clever and deadly hunting cat. For Conan knows what he wants—and what he must do to get

THE TREASURE OF TRANICOS

One of the greatest Conan stories Howard ever wrote will come alive before your very eyes in page after page of fabulous illustrations by the master fantasy artist **Esteban Maroto**.



ISBN 0-441-82246-0